



SPICE & WOLF

Vol. 24

Spring Log VII

ISUNA HASEKURA

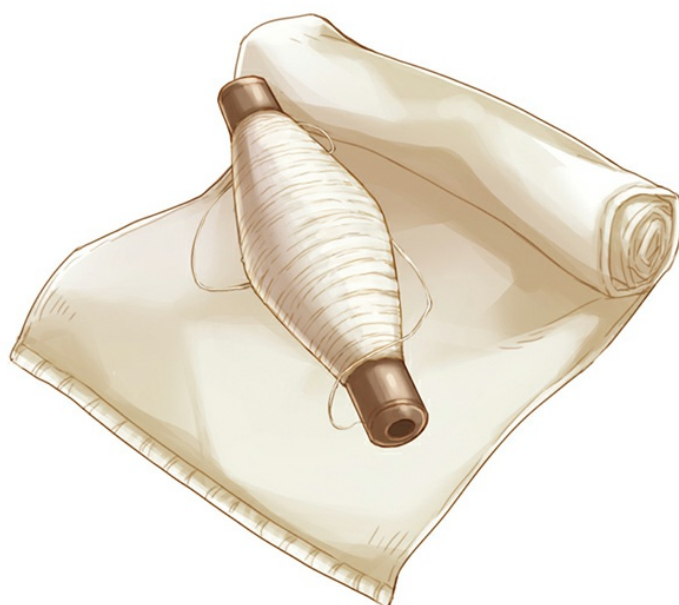


SPIGE WOLF

Vol. 24

SPRING LOG VII

By ISUNA HASEKURA
ILLUSTRATED BY JYUU AYAKURA





MERCHANT WHO
FEARS NO GOD
EVE BOLAN

"TO OUR
REUNION."
EVE FIRST
LIFTED HER
GLASS FOR THE
TOAST.

"BUT GOODNESS
ME. JUST LOOK
AT YOU."

LAWRENCE
THOUGHT SHE
WAS TALKING
ABOUT HOLO,
WHO WAS BUSY
CHOMPING
ON HER MEAT,
BUT SHE WAS, IN
FACT, LOOKING
AT HIM.





“...WELL,
IF THIS ISN'T
A SURPRISE.”

ROWEN TRADE
GUILD EXECUTIVE
LUD KIEMAN

“WE HAVE
URGENT
BUSINESS.”

IT WAS A LATE HOUR WHERE A MORE
RESPECTABLE MERCHANT WOULD RETURN TO
THE INN TO PREPARE FOR THE MORROW.

BUT WHO SHOULD APPEAR OUT OF THE BLUE
BUT AN ACQUAINTANCE WHO SHOULD, AT
THE PRESENT MOMENT, BE WORKING IN THE
DISTANT, DEEP MOUNTAINS—OF COURSE
EVEN THE MOST SEASONED OF MERCHANTS
SUCH AS KIEMAN WOULD BE FLUSTERED.

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SPICE & WOLF

VOLUME XXIV
SPRING LOG VII

ISUNA HASEKURA
JYUU AYAKURA


NEW YORK

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SPICE AND WOLF, Volume 24

ISUNA HASEKURA

Translation by Jasmine Bernhardt Cover art by Jyuu Ayakura

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OKAMI TO KOSHINRYO

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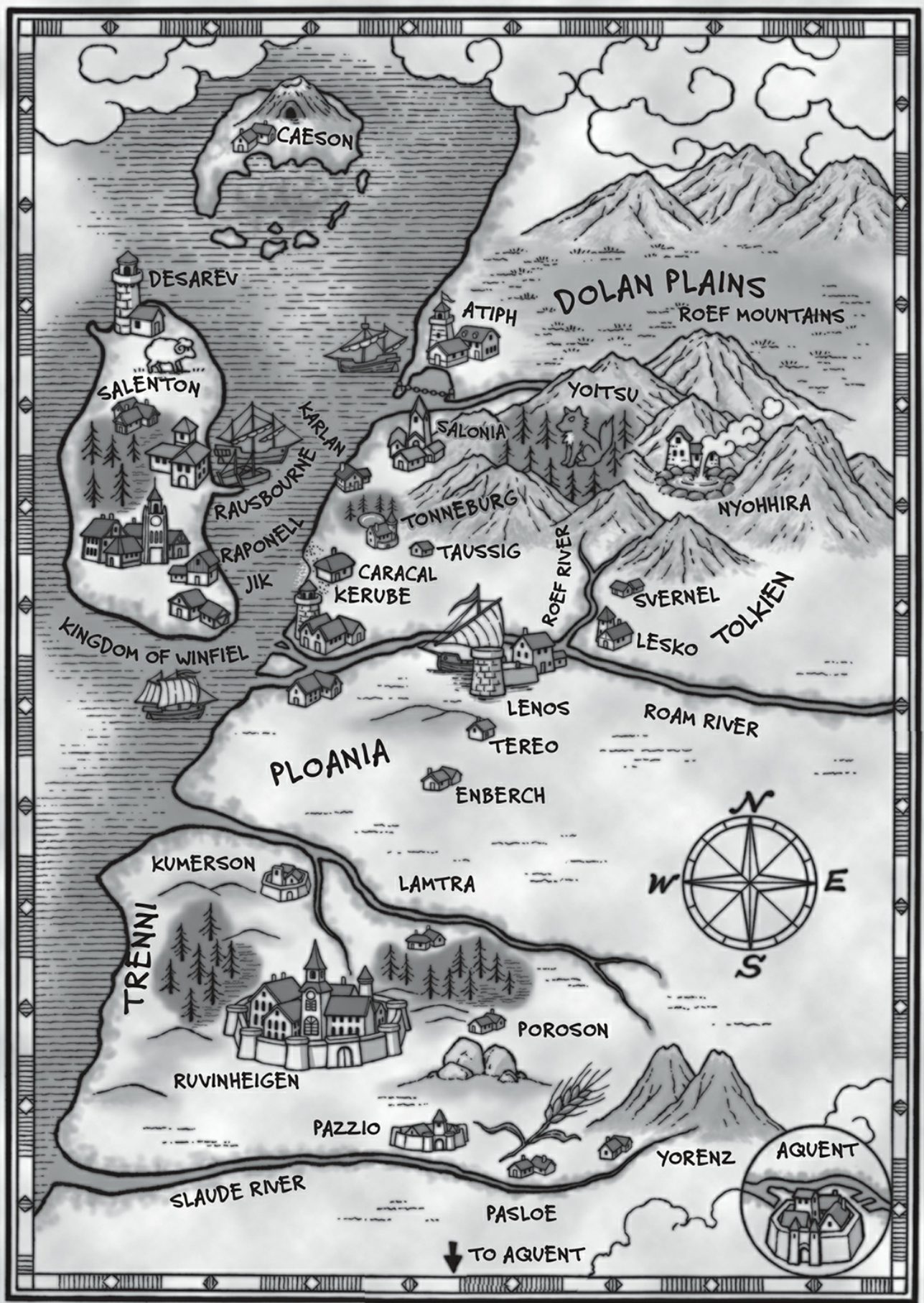
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CHAPTER ONE



CHAPTER ONE

No one knows what will happen on a journey.

It's well within the realm of possibility to part ways with a companion and promise to meet again in the next city, only for that friend to fall ill a few days later and pass away. One may purchase plenty of goods, convinced that it will bring guaranteed profits right up until it becomes clear that demand already crashed, inviting bankruptcy instead of business. And perhaps a simple visit to a town for supplies leads to picking up a girl who desperately wishes to return to the north.

And so, who could blame a girl who set out on a journey of her own when she stopped sending letters home, despite how much worry it would cause her parents? As it turned out, that was reason enough to encourage the girl's mother and father to descend from their hot spring village nestled deep in the mountains and see the world again.

In the course of retracing Myuri's and Col's footsteps, Lawrence and Holo found themselves inextricably drawn into world events. They met a squirrel spirit, reunited with old traveling friends, and even came close to becoming rulers of their own domain.

Though the matter of lordship had occupied Lawrence's mind for a time, he ultimately chose easygoing travels with the self-proclaimed Wisewolf, along with her penchant for jerky and booze. Then they departed from the city of Salonia by boat and headed toward the open sea.

They headed downriver, sipping drinks and listening to the shanties.

Lawrence believed they would hear more about a certain rambunctious girl and her adoptive older brother in the next seaside city, but—

"Hmm...? What did you say?"

Puffy eyes peeked out from a messy mop of hair to peer at Lawrence.

He had not minded it so much in his sleep, but after waking up, leaving the room, washing his face at the well, preparing breakfast while collecting information from early-morning travelers, and then finally returning to the room, the strong smell of alcohol that *still* filled the air caused him to scrunch up his face.

“You’ve been drinking too much.”

Lawrence glanced briefly at Holo as she lay whining in bed before he threw open the windows and took a deep breath of fresh air.

“’Tis too bright...”

He might have felt inclined to shield a moss-laden forest spirit from the harsh rays of sunlight, but he felt no pity for the wisewolf who had been entranced by the musical performance of the tavern bards and ended up dancing the night away, drink in hand the entire time.

“Even the most boring parts of a journey are filled with delight when I travel with you”—she had *just* moved him with such touching words, and now this. Though Elsa was not around to scold him about it, he still felt like he really did spoil Holo a bit too much. Of course, it was a little late for that epiphany.

“Good grief. Well, you look like you regret being alive at the moment, so I’ve got great news for you. No boats are heading downstream right now.”

Lawrence sat in the chair, waiting for the fresh air from outside to replace the strong smell of ale as he bit into a piece of bread he had purchased.

“Mm... That smell...”

Holo, who would normally leap from bed at the first whiff of freshly baked bread, instead scrunched up her face and groaned. Lawrence had seen this sight so many times he was genuinely quite tired of it, but he knew it would be a massive pain to clean up if she vomited, and he also knew he might have to pay the inn an exorbitant amount if it turned out particularly badly. And so, with a sigh, he moved his chair away from Holo to avoid bothering her nose.

“Something’s going on in the port city downriver. I think we’ll be stuck here a while.”

“.....”

Lawrence could usually tell when Holo was listening by watching her ears, but they did not so much as twitch.

He swallowed his sigh with a bite of bread and continued, “It looks like our options are either wait here for things to blow over or get a horse and cart to travel by land.”

Lawrence paused, wondering if he would get an answer, but he received none. Her typically beautiful tail was all ruffled and messy, reminding him of a stray dog that had been tragically run over by a wagon.

This was all her own fault to begin with.

“If we go by land, then we may as well head straight south to Kerube. It might be easier to find information on Myuri and Col there. It’s the busiest city in the area, so I know they’ll have lots of good food.”

The fur on her tail twitched at the words *good food*, so now he was sure he had her attention.

But even Lawrence could not tell if that meant she was not interested in talking about food right now or if she was hoping to be fed the moment she felt better.

“Well, we’re not in any rush, so you can rest. Travelers coming from downstream should be arriving in the afternoon, and they should have a better idea of what’s going on.”

Lawrence thought he heard Holo say something, but soon all he could hear were her deep, sleeping breaths. She was probably just mumbling in her sleep.

With a weary smile, he put the half-eaten bread into his mouth and pulled the blanket over his princess.

Rivers, without fail, passed through several private lands, and that meant checkpoints sat in each one.

Most consisted of nothing more than a riverside hut run by one or two overbearing tax collectors, but some were lively places where multiple land-borne trade routes intersected. Those were proper post towns where inns and

taverns meant for travelers could be easily found.

The place where Lawrence and Holo were staying was not the most developed, but there were at least three buildings that offered meals and lodging, as well as some local artisans who mended clothes and shoes—more than enough amenities for a traveler to rest in comfort.

As vexing as it was to be taxed at each checkpoint, this was a place meant for travelers. It was nice to sit outside a tavern and have a drink during the day without needing to worry about any judgmental glares.

Lawrence sipped at his cheap wine, which had become somewhat tasty only after he added a gratuitous amount of honey. At the same time, he gathered information as people passed him by.

The moment he realized a shadow had fallen over him, he also noticed a girl had brusquely taken the seat across from him.

“You seem quite comfortable on your own, no?”

The one who had decided to insult Lawrence without so much as glancing at him was a girl who seemed to be in her early teens.

But she seemed in her element by the way she raised her hand to catch the bartender’s attention, and it was clear she knew what she was doing by the way she ordered a sweet yet sour juice that would one day become alcoholic cider. Today, however, its duty was to ease her hangover, and she made sure to order honey to make it even sweeter. Despite how young she looked, she was still the same centuries-old wolf.

“I am pleased. There is plenty of the good honey here.”

“But that doesn’t make it any cheaper.”

“You fool,” Holo said, eyes dropping to the piece of jerky by his hand. Though she frowned, likely not pleased by the prospect of eating tough food right after waking up, she still reached out and pulled the entire plate toward herself, as though deciding that she would make do with what he had.

“Shouldn’t you have porridge or something instead?”

“Then order it for me. Make it hot.”

Her drink that came shortly after was a deep red that likely came from steeped gooseberries. She took a swig and immediately squeezed her eyes shut—perhaps it was sour, even with the honey. After exhaling heavily, Holo bit into a piece of jerky.

Lawrence was glad she seemed healthier and asked for soup with breadcrumbs in it.

“And? What led you to leave me behind and come drinking, hmm?”

“You’re not even sick. You wanted me to stay with you and hold your hand?”

Holo kicked Lawrence under the table. He could see it was partly their normal banter, yes, but what stood out to him was how she seemed genuinely frustrated with him.

Perhaps she did not mind so much that he was gone when she woke up, but that the open window had swept away most of his scent.

Even though this wolf seemed laidback at a glance, she had lived for much longer than any normal human lifespan; her waking moments were often plagued by the sneaking suspicion that everything was but an ephemeral dream. And in that moment of self-doubt, she must have rushed to the window only to find Lawrence enjoying a drink by himself. Most likely, that was what had set her off.

“You didn’t hear a word I said this morning, did you?” Lawrence asked flatly.

“What are you talking about?” Holo narrowed her eyes at him.

“Obviously, it’s the very reason we’re lounging around at the inn, even though it’s way past noon.”

She opened her mouth to say something, but she knew anything she said would have the opposite effect.

She pouted and sipped on her honeyed juice.

“There’s some kind of big city council meeting at the port down the river.”

Lawrence reached to pluck a piece of what remained of his jerky, watching new ships arrive from upstream. Yet none were leaving the docks, which meant they were crowded with boats. There was a lot more traffic headed

downstream than he expected.

“It sounds like they’re discussing taxes, so everyone’s keeping a close eye on it.”

Holo, who still looked very hungover, lightly furrowed her brow and said, “Then should it not be the opposite?”

She followed his gaze toward the docks just as a new ship bursting with cargo arrived. The idle apprehension that it would not be able to fit anywhere was for naught—the skilled pilots easily guided it into the tiniest of spots.

“Are taxes not the worst nightmare of you merchants? Why not rush downriver before they are levied against you?”

“If I did, you’d be feeding the river fish your dinner from last night right about now.”

Ships that crossed the sea rolled, but so did those that traversed the river. Lawrence could not help but smile when he pictured a languid Holo—she was always adorable—but when he noticed the wolf looking at him dubiously, he cleared his throat.

“To everyone’s surprise, they’re talking about lowering the tariffs to enter the city.”

The reason Holo did not quip at Lawrence right away was because the soup came at the exact same time.

She scooped up the soggy bits of bread with her wooden spoon and began to devour it.

“And that’s why everyone—travelers and even merchants—are all staying put until the local council announces their verdict.”

Thick pieces of carp swam in the soup along with the bread. Holo kept her mouth open as she breathed to cool herself down, taking a swig of her juice to help. Then she licked her lips and raised her head.

“Then it has nothing to do with us, no? We have no cargo. I do not mind this place, but I would prefer to idle my time away in a larger city.”

“Yeah...but it could also be bait.”

“Bait?”

“A rumor to lure people in, and then... *Chomp*.”

Walls that surround a city do not only protect those inside from outside enemies. They also prevent those inside from escaping. Cities that wanted to fill their war chests, for example, often forced visiting merchants to pay exorbitant travel fees if they wished to leave the city. Many would reluctantly pay the high tax, knowing it was preferable to getting caught up in a war. It was entirely possible that the local officials wanted to lure merchants into the city for precisely that reason.

What sat in Holo’s spoon were fish that just so happened to get caught in traps lying at the bottom of the river—and just so happened to become ingredients for soup.

Holo’s gaze drifted to the sky in thought as she brought the morsel to her mouth.

“Mm. Sounds plausible.”

“So, how about we stay out of danger and head south by land instead?”

Holo frowned at the suggestion. That was the face of someone who was actively recalling the pain in her tail that came from sitting on a rickety cart and comparing it to the comforts of boat travel.

“If we manage to reach the Roef River, we could then catch another boat to Kerube.”

“Kerube... The name is familiar.”

“That’s where they caught the narwhal, remember? The sea creature whose horn is supposed to grant eternal life if you grind it into a powder and drink it.”

Holo lifted her chin and gave a cheerless nod.

A being that lived longer than any human likely had complicated feelings about things that supposedly offered eternal life. Or perhaps she recalled the conflict involving the absolute greediest merchants they had met in their travels together.

“The good old Rowen Trade Guild is in Kerube. We could say hello to all those

who helped us while we were getting the bathhouse set up. It should also be easier to get information on Myuri and Col there.”

Their only daughter Myuri and the boy who both worked in the bathhouse and doted on Myuri like an older brother were making quite a name for themselves. Lawrence and Holo had flippantly assumed the kids would be easy to find because of that, but it turned out to be a surprisingly impossible task because they had become *too* famous. There were many rumors about them, ranging from miracles performed on a mountaintop to plagues cured in some distant town.

However, Lawrence expected companies with trading houses spread across multiple cities to have more accurate information.

“Hmm. That is the river on which we found little Col, and the city beyond that, no? ’Tis quite a long way away.”

“Yeah, the route isn’t a straight shot from here to there, so it’d probably be three—no, we’re not going there for trade, so we can take it slow—meaning it’d be more like five, maybe six days by cart... I don’t really know this area very well.”

Holo’s complaints might have been aggravating if Lawrence himself had not become rather accustomed to the bathhouse life. His back would immediately start hurting on the hard driver’s perch of a cart. They would have to look up the roads, make stops, take rests, and everything else. It would probably take even longer.

Either way, they were starting to see signs that the plans for their tranquil little journey were about to fall apart, and Holo slurped her soup loudly in protest.

“I shan’t say no if you choose to ride on my back.”

Holo, in her wolf form, could probably get there in one night.

“What about the horse?”

“...Horsemeat is sweet but goes surprisingly well with strong liquor.”

Lawrence, unsure how genuine her joke was, simply sighed and sipped his

wine.

“Personally, I want to wait and see what happens for just a little longer.”

“Mm?”

“I don’t know what the city down there’s thinking, but if they really do lower taxes, then it’d be better if we get all our nonessentials over there, right? We’ve had a lot of customers at the bathhouse recently who aren’t nobility who have also been complaining when they have to forgo luxuries from the south.”

Holo regarded him coolly, like he was a fool sharing his dreams of becoming rich.

“You are a male who never learns his lesson. We leave matters to the rabbit and his company. Do you not remember when you ordered wheat from a new place and ended up swindled with cheap product?”

The Debau Company, where a certain rabbit spirit acted as head clerk, was a reliable liaison for the Spice and Wolf bathhouse when they needed to order more supplies.

As for the wheat incident, it was Holo and Myuri who had sniffed out that cheap rye grain had been mixed in with the expensive wheat, which allowed them to escape the worst.

“Oops. But if I never learn, then should I tell you why you had such a hard time waking up this morning?”

Holo pursed her lips into a thin line, but she did not kick him.

The moment Lawrence was convinced she had finally started regretting the excessive drinking because of her terrible hangover, he sensed someone approach their table. He looked up.

Standing there was a man wearing the clothes of a farmer, a thin hat clutched in his hands, offering both of them a hesitant smile.

“You must be Sir Kraft Lawrence and his honorable wife, yes?”

It was hard to say the man was dressed finely, and his overly polite language was rather odd, but it was immediately clear that he knew who they were, because what he offered along with his greeting was a small cask of alcohol that

could fit under one's arm.

Even though Holo had at last gotten over her hangover, her eyes glimmered as she reached out to take the cask with great delight.

"Heh-heh... Mmm, this is good quality mead! Aye, if you've a need to speak with us, go on, then."

Obviously, when she said *us*, she really meant Lawrence.

Lawrence sighed and turned his attention to the farmer.

He was farmer-*like* in the sense that he dressed like one, but his demeanor was unusually refined, and he seemed quite comfortable offering mead in greeting.

Lawrence thought back on all the people he had met in trade, yet he did not find the face familiar.

"Pardon me, but have we met before?"

"No, this is our first meeting. But I heard of your undertakings in Salonia."

Lawrence nodded.

He had gotten a little *too* excited in Salonia and had become a bit of a celebrity there.

It was nice that they were able to eat and drink all they liked and had a grand time overall, but the attention they garnered had caused unexpected waves.

"I know you are in the middle of your travels, but please, I hope you will listen to what I have to say."

His polite language and the way he sank to one knee to make his plea told Lawrence that despite his appearance, this man often interacted with those of higher status.

But he was much too young to be a mayor, and somehow they could tell that he was no normal villager. Lawrence rifled through all the knowledge he had gained in his past travels as a merchant as he carefully studied the man's belongings. He noted a simple hatchet and a small bow. And the way he adroitly prepared a flask of fine mead for Holo told Lawrence everything he needed to

know.

“What could a forest ranger possibly need from us?”

The man’s eyes widened in surprise and a bright smile burst across his face moments later.

“So this is the great mind of Sir Lawrence, Salonia’s problem solver! Please, we need your help!”

As much as Lawrence wanted to tell him that this journey was meant for him and his wife alone, Holo was already happily nursing her mead. *It sure must be nice knowing she’s not the one who’ll be taking care of this problem*, Lawrence thought. Then another possibility occurred to him.

It was very likely that she had smelled the earth and the trees on this man and immediately known he was someone who worked in the forest. Just like how Lawrence was enticed by many get-rich-quick schemes, Holo loved the forest beyond all else, so she had likely engineered this so Lawrence would offer an ear to a troubled forest dweller. And if she received mead as a bonus, then all the better.

This meant that if he were to turn this man away, Lawrence knew he would be once again exiled from the bed and forced to sleep alone on the floor.

“I would be glad to,” Lawrence replied, already feeling tired.

The man was delighted and Holo gave a satisfied nod.

The man called himself Meyer Linde, the latest in a long line of forest rangers hired by the lords of the Tonneburg territory, which was situated south of this checkpoint. Holo was strangely impressed by the name of the man’s occupation. She probably assumed it denoted a person whose job was to watch over the forest and doubted anyone who did so professionally could be a bad person.

But forest rangers did not simply watch over the forest. They did just that, yes, but their focus was the natural resources in a specific part of the forest, not the whole. The woods around Nyohhira were too deep for rangers’ services to be useful, but the farther south one went, the more valuable they became. And thus, the roles they played became more and more important. Precious, even,

for places like this one, where much of the land had been cleared for wheat production.

Ranger Meyer was responsible for the Tonneburg Woods, which was rather hilly compared to the surrounding area, which meant it was home to dense, untouched forest.

Meyer's current concerns were a plan to cut down the old growth trees, ship off the lumber, and build another road through it.

"And so you'd like to stop this plan, correct?"

"Yes. But there has been trouble so I'd like your help, Sir Lawrence, if you would be willing."

The words *forest dweller* tended to conjure up images of pessimistic, anti-social individuals with overgrown beards that resembled untamed moss and eyes that were always open wide like spooked deer. The reality was that rangers were civil servants who worked in the forest.

They were often in the employ of nobles and spent their days arbitrating conflicts of interest concerning the land, which meant their manner of speech was refined. If someone told him that Meyer was the head clerk of a merchant company, he would not have doubted it for a second.

And so of course he would be skilled in finding openings and taking advantage of them.

"I originally visited Salonia to keep an eye on a series of negotiations," Meyer paused, giving Lawrence a meaningful glance. "I admire your work, Sir Lawrence. But the negotiations on the lumber tariff decrease that you stopped have caused unexpected waves."

Unexpected waves. Lawrence had a terrible feeling about that ominous turn of phrase.

"I did offer to do everything I could on behalf of the Salonia Church, but... Do you mean to say that I have inadvertently caused problems for you, Lord Tonneburg, or the people of your region?"

"No, no, I would not call it a problem, per se."

Though Meyer's manners and humble bearing were impeccable, his words did not seem very sincere. He was like a lamprey, moving effortlessly even as he steadily approached his objective.

Holo seemed oddly pleased by both Meyer's general demeanor and the way Lawrence seemed to be feeling awkwardly pressured in this conversation. Lawrence was slightly bitter about that.

"It is clear that you chose the correct path on behalf of the church, in accordance with God's teachings. But as a result, lumber tariffs remained much the same. Consequently, the port town of Karlan, which sits at the mouth of this river, cannot procure cheap lumber due to your actions."

"Ah."

Lawrence knew immediately where Meyer's story was headed, and he made a quiet noise in his throat. Holo's wolf ears twitched beneath her hood and she fixed Lawrence with a cold stare.

"If tariffs on lumber that passes through Salonia were lower, then Karlan would be able to obtain cheap lumber. That plan has crumbled, however, and so they have been pressuring Lord Tonneburg to cut a path through our forests, which is something they were planning to do previously."

The price of lumber had skyrocketed recently; even in Nyohhira, a place completely surrounded by dense forests, the amount of firewood any individual could collect was restricted by council decree. The rules were even stricter in places where there were overwhelmingly more plains and grasslands than forest.

The discussion on lumber tariffs in Salonia did not come from the lumber merchants' desire to make a quick coin, but because every regional merchant had been watching over the entire affair with bated breath.

In essence, the kneeling ranger was saying that because of Lawrence's actions in Salonia, now his precious Tonneburg Woods were being targeted—and the implicit question was how Lawrence would make up for it.

In addition to Meyer's damning assessment, Lawrence could feel Holo's reproachful stare. She would always side with the forest.

If Lawrence had simply not stuck his nose where it did not belong, then lumber tariffs would have gone down, the port town of Karlan would have been able to obtain lumber for cheap, and Meyer's Tonneburg Woods would have been left alone.

"I—I believe I understand your predicament. So, what exactly are you having trouble with?" Lawrence asked, like a criminal desperately trying to stay his execution for even a moment longer.

Tonneburg and its lord were likely not negotiating from a position of strength when they held talks with Karlan. Perhaps the city employed mercenaries to strong-arm its neighbors, like in the days of yore.

Or, more likely, it would be the sort of issue Lawrence could help navigate and resolve somehow.

"Lord Tonneburg agrees with cutting the forest down."

Holo frowned. For her, it was unthinkable that the lord of the land would agree to have it developed like that when he was supposed to safeguard it. Lawrence, on the other hand, dipped his head because he could already see where this was going.

"Your lord agreed to—"

"Yes."

Meyer returned Lawrence's stare and gave a firm nod. Though mere moments earlier the man was like a slippery fox, his eyes were now that of an eagle that had spotted its prey.

"A humble peddler like—ahem," Lawrence cleared his throat, pausing in his habit of saying *humble peddler like myself*. "I am no noble. I doubt I have the power to meddle in the political affairs of a city and a local landowner—ouch!"

Meyer stared wide-eyed at Lawrence, who returned the look with a vague smile in an attempt to brush over his stumble.

Holo had kicked his ankle under the table.

"Your fears are reasonable, of course," Meyer continued, pivoting ahead to make sure his prey would not slip away. "But you are perfectly suited to resolve

this situation precisely *because* you excel in trade, sir.”

“.....”

Lawrence gave a little sigh, and not because Holo had kicked him. He gestured for Meyer to keep going.

“First, I believe Lord Tonneburg has made a simple error in his calculations. A forest, once cut down, does not easily grow back. And yet, he not only wants to clear trees but is also giving into temptation and plans to build coal-burning huts and smithies as Karlan has requested.”

Lawrence held his breath not in response to what Meyer said, but because he could hear Holo’s tail beginning to rustle beneath her clothes despite her blank expression.

“And that’s not all. Lord Tonneburg is looking to build a road through the forest so that all of the refined metal and coal can be easily transported, further developing trade. Representatives of Karlan sit on his shoulder and whisper to him that with a road, his wallet will grow fat off tolls, and he believes it.”

It was true that Lawrence found Meyer’s words a bit overwhelming, but the reason he shifted in his chair was because it no longer seemed like this was simply about making up for the cheap lumber that was supposed to be sourced from Salonia.

“The woods will grow thin, and the people who depend on the trees will be reduced to poverty. Yet all Lord Tonneburg can think about is the lumber trade, the coal-burning industry, the profitable smithies, and the lucrative tolls from those new roads. He has decided to line his pockets even if it means his people becoming impoverished and the woods dying.”

It did not seem as though Meyer reached out to Lawrence only because he was involved in the events that unfolded in Salonia. He had shrewdly determined that the only way to persuade his liege was to show him that he shouldn’t count his chickens before they hatched—making Lawrence the perfect man for the job.

“I have learned that you are now the owner of a bathhouse in a very well-known hot spring village, but you were once a renowned merchant who

traveled the world over. I would be forever thankful if you could put that trading knowledge to use and tell Lord Tonneburg that his appraisal is not completely accurate.”

The overstated praise was not simple flattery—the fact that the bathhouse had been mentioned at all was proof of that.

Meyer was shrewd. He had done his research on the events in Salonia and had likely met Elsa in the process. It was a subtle threat; this was his way of telling Lawrence that he knew *exactly* who he was.

“What do you think? If you help me protect the woods, then I promise you seasonal ciders made with the fruits of the forest, in addition to mead, dried mushrooms, venison, and rabbit jerky. I vow on Tonneburg Woods’s honor that they are excellent products and more than enough to satisfy all the nobility who visit Nyohhira seeking relaxation and comfort.”

Holo’s eyes were glimmering at the delicious proposition, but it sounded completely different to Lawrence’s ear. A discreet offer of goods in lieu of coin most likely meant that paying for his services was either difficult or outright impossible.

That was because a vassal seeking to overturn his lord’s decisions would be risking life and limb.

The correct answer, if given careful thought, would be for Lawrence to immediately accept Meyer’s proposal with a smile, pack his bags, and run away with Holo in tow. If the other party insisted on following through on the veiled threat of harassing the bathhouse, then it would be a simple matter to retaliate with their nonhuman allies.

But there was good reason why Lawrence had no room to maneuver. The growling of the empty stomach from the glutton beside him aside, it was still true that those who lived in the forest would lose all its blessings if it was exploited with wild abandon.

More importantly, there was a much weightier issue than his role in the events at Salonia, which were the reason this was happening in the first place. And the heart of that issue sat behind him.

All he had to do was picture Holo when, one day, after this moment became a distant memory, she set off on a fresh journey in pursuit of fond memories. There might be a day when she would visit the Tonneburg Woods on a rumor.

He pictured her standing there alone, looking out over a wasteland dotted by the occasional tree, a place that humans had shattered long ago.

To Lawrence, nothing could possibly be sadder.

“Hmm?”

When Lawrence glanced aside, he found Holo looking at him dubiously.

He stood at a crossroads, in a way.

Would Holo fall to her knees at the threshold of a wizened forest, fingers brushing parched earth? Or would she laugh when she found a message left to her from Lawrence, carved into a sapling?

That was how he urged himself to his decision.

Rationally speaking, asking a ruler to change their mind was something wise people avoided. Yet Meyer was requesting that he show his lord how misguided his thinking was. In essence, this was a matter that did involve trade, but the problem was an entire magnitude more complicated.

Reasons he should turn this request down loomed over Lawrence like a mountain.

Yet opposite him sat Holo, and she looked at him with wide eyes.

There was risk both in getting involved and in not getting involved.

He balanced everything on his mental scales, then finally said, “...Would you give us a moment to speak?”

Meyer must have sensed the partial surrender in his tone; he glanced between Lawrence and Holo, keeping his expression as blank as possible, and bowed his head.

“You fool! The forest is at risk because of you!”

Holo, sitting atop the blankets, thwacked her tail over the bed once, twice.

And when it landed against the sheets for a third time, she cradled it in her

lap.

“...As much as I *wish* I could scold you so, I admit I was rather pleased you put in so much effort on my behalf in the previous town,” she said, glancing at her diary and the gifted cask on the table.

Both were perfectly sweet.

“Luckily, this matter involves the forest. I may not get many chances to make a difference in human affairs, but I may be able to play a role yet when it comes to protecting the woods.”

Lawrence was surprised.

“Why the face? We simply discourage them from cutting down the trees, no? Such conflict can be resolved in an instant by simply flashing my fangs.”

Foolish humans who ventured into the deep, pristine wood were at risk of running right into the sharp claws of the forest spirits.

That would lead to a happy ending in a fairy tale, but reality was not so simple.

That was especially true when it came to business.

“I understand. I know you want to protect the forest. But—”

“But what?”

“Do you remember what Meyer said? He wanted me to show his lord that his calculations were wrong.”

Holo met him with a confused look, and he continued.

“We’ve only heard Meyer’s claims so far. It means it’s technically possible that saving the forest might not be the right thing to do, despite what he says.”

“.....”

Holo’s eyes glazed over, as though she could not believe what she was hearing. It was like she was telling him that there was never a good reason to cut down a forest.

With a sigh, Lawrence launched into an explanation. “In storybooks about the forests and their spirits, good and evil are always clearly marked. And so, if we

were being asked to save the lord's beloved woods, then the answer would be easy. But when it comes to gold, silver, and those whose lives they support, what is good and evil becomes much, much more complicated."



Holo's tail gave a sullen twitch.

"Do you mean to claim that fool was lying?"

"I don't doubt your ears. But we can't say anything definitive about the things he didn't bring up at all, can we?"

Holo pursed her lips.

"Let's talk about land used for planting wheat, for example. Is it right to keep the forest intact when there isn't enough land for wheat? By cutting down the trees, villages will thrive, and some people might even be saved from starvation. It's entirely possible that this Lord Tonneburg and his people both want this, while Meyer is the only one who doesn't. He came to us for help because he didn't want to lose his precious woods, right?"

It wasn't impossible that Lord Tonneburg was thinking of his people first and foremost when he decided to work with the town of Karlan to clear the forests. If that was true, then fulfilling Meyer's request would ruin those plans.

If that were to happen, it would be very easy for them to track down Lawrence the Nyohhira bathhouse owner, which would obviously cause problems for them in the future.

"Of course, I could simply decide to do this for *you*, because you always want to protect the forests."

Holo glanced at Lawrence when he said this, then looked away in a pouty huff.

This wolf was not a wicked pagan spirit that could not care less about humans. She had faithfully kept her promise to a human villager for centuries, presiding over Pasloe's bountiful wheat harvests.

And because of that, it was unlikely Holo would be any happier if they decided to keep the forest intact only to condemn a great many to poverty.

Lawrence had spent many years in the world of trade—a crossroads of countless interests. Before his eyes, he could see rows upon rows of scales, tipping in every direction, weighed down by various choices.

"Or...", Lawrence began, deciding to ask just in case. "...was Meyer a spirit?"

If he were, then Lawrence would knock away all the scales on the table and replace it with a war map. He could completely disregard the interests of the human world and fight for the livelihood of the forest with the same enthusiasm he did when he decided to become Holo's life partner.

Perhaps his intentions had gotten across to her; the fur on her tail perked, but it had apparently been an unconscious motion.

Realizing how her tail had reacted, Holo gave him a hard glare and said with a sigh, "He is human. Though he smells of earth and wood, I also caught the scent of gold and silver coins. Like you."

If there was one thing that definitively separated Lawrence and Holo, it was not Lawrence's lack of ears and tail. Nor was it the gap in their lifespan.

It was their differing attitudes toward money, and their attitudes toward loss and profits, which could also be called a sort of faith.

"Thought so. That makes this about trade, then."

Holo would of course want to jump on a request to save a forest from being cut down, but this was not a remote mountain inhabited by spirits—this was a land that supported human livelihood.

And the mechanisms that made up the human world were complicated.

"You plan to turn him down?"

Her tone was thorny and did not sound genuinely reproachful, but it was a sign that she would not be backing down without a fight. Even Holo, who was the one typically admonishing Lawrence for constantly sticking his nose into trouble, was not going to easily give in when it came to preserving the forests.

And Lawrence, of course, felt responsibility for their actions in Salonia, which had unintentionally affected the Tonneburg Woods—and there was Holo, too.

Yet despite all that, Meyer's request came with all sorts of concerns that made Lawrence want to decline it.

That was why there was a part of him that wished Holo would lie to him and say that Meyer was not human.

After that thought crossed his mind, he sighed. Though Holo was a heavy

drinker and constant snacker and told lies over the silliest things, she would never treat such an important moment lightly. And so, there was only one person here who could fool the selfish former merchant who always put his own safety first.

And that would be the part of him that used to be a smooth-talking businessman.

“Anyway...,” Lawrence began with a deep sigh; one of Holo’s drooping ears pricked upright. “Whether Lord Tonneburg’s decision is right or wrong, there *is* something strange about the way the town of Karlan is acting.”

Holo’s reddish eyes slowly turned in his direction, wide open.

“The original plan to lower the lumber tariff didn’t go well, so they’ve set their eyes on the Tonneburg Woods looking for cheap lumber. That makes perfect sense from a commerce perspective. But there have been rumors that Karlan might be lowering their own tariffs.”

“Mm...hmm?”

Holo’s expression was complicated, unsure what to make of this news.

“Karlan is letting go of their precious tax revenue. Yet they’re pointing their finger right at Tonneburg in search of cheap lumber. They’ve even come up with a rather expansive plan. On the surface, it doesn’t seem to add up. Because if they don’t have enough money to buy lumber at current prices, then they shouldn’t be so willing to lower their tax revenue.”

Holo dipped her head and looked to Lawrence for a brief moment, before her eyes drifted upward.

“I...suppose that’s true. But are you absolutely certain that Karlan is not going through the same troubles as the other city where you went on a rampage?”

She made a very reasonable point. As expected of the Wisewolf.

Just like how the lumber tariffs in Salonia affected Karlan downriver, Karlan, too, was perhaps nothing more than a passing point for the lumber that would continue traveling to their final destinations elsewhere. That meant it was possible that there were people out there besides those in Salonia and Karlan

who had an interest in cheaper lumber and lower tariffs.

“Mm. ’Tis strange, then. Are the lowered tariffs in Karlan affecting lumber alone?”

If anyone asked Lawrence to name what he liked about Holo, he would undoubtedly say that he adored how she was smarter than him.

He cleared his throat, trying to hide his delight.

“From what I’ve heard, it won’t just be lumber, no. That’s why there’s something strange about this. Something big must be going on behind the scenes in town.”

Holo drew up her shoulders, legs still crossed, and grasped at her toes.

“If so, then...what?”

There was an obsequious look in her eyes because she knew that the situation was going to turn out much more complicated than she anticipated, despite how reluctant Lawrence was. That is to say, he had found a reason to turn down Meyer’s request.

In all honesty, that was what Lawrence wanted to do.

But everything could change with a single thought.

“Think about it for a second.”

“Hm...?”

“I’m saying there’s something even bigger looming over this town.”

Perhaps the reason the astute Holo had not noticed was because Lawrence’s attitude had been much too careless. This was a horse dangling a carrot in front of its own nose, after all.

“Karlan has drawn some kind of grand picture, and Tonneburg is about to sadly lose its precious forest. And when things get this big, you know what’s usually hidden in between the lines, right?”

“Mm...”

“A chance to get incredibly rich. Right?”

“Ah.”

When they had journeyed together when Lawrence was still a traveling merchant, Holo would give him a cold stare every night whenever he went wide-eyed thinking about a scheme to earn a heap of coins. Those were his ambitions—and they were entirely gone now.

The reason he had discarded them was because he had found something more important to him than gold, and he wanted to keep that safe.

That something turned out to be Holo—whose wolf ears were flitting this way and that. There was an apologetic, yet expectant look on her face as she peered at him; it was a hard expression for her beloved to ignore.

Lawrence decided to consider this a favor and said, “I’m talking about a whiff of *gold*, one that’ll attract this former merchant who’s also a massive fool.”

There was a glint in Holo’s eyes, and her tail thumped against the bed like a puppy’s.

Lawrence set his jaw and steeled himself, not letting his expression melt like he wanted.

“I’m going to ask you one more time. You didn’t sense Meyer telling lies or anything, did you?”

Holo’s ears pricked upright at the question, and she shook her head.

“He did not behave as though he was making something up.”

When he got his answer, all Lawrence could do was sigh.

“No hard feelings if it doesn’t turn out the way you want, okay?”

Cutting down the forest might turn out to be for the people’s sake; they might even earn Lord Tonneburg’s ire and have to protect the bathhouse. Or perhaps Karlan was planning something unbelievable, including encroaching on the Tonneburg Woods. Worse, Lawrence and Holo might not even see a single silver coin in profits if they got involved.

Yet the wisewolf, who would live a much longer life than Lawrence, repeated what she told him not too long ago.

“It will still be a part of my memory, traveling with you.”

It did not matter what happened, so long as they were together. No matter how lonely she was, or how bored or pained she was, it was all proof that she was alive now.

A priest might consider it a terribly decadent way of thinking, and it almost sounded like it was just a convenient excuse in their current situation.

And in truth, it was nothing more than an excuse.

It was easy to find pessimism in the world; because of her pessimistic outlook, Holo often found herself wanting to stop traveling with Lawrence. It was Lawrence himself who thrust that mindset of hers aside, and in the end, she found that she truly did wish to spend her life with another.

And when she did at last, she found ahead of her days filled with joy.

“You’re a sly wolf, you know that?”

In the end, perhaps this had always been the obvious choice to begin with.

If either of them lived sensibly and only ever made smart decisions, then they never would’ve walked hand in hand.

“...A wolf never lets go of her prey, you know.”

She took his hand in hers, her smile filled with genuine gratitude.

She was more precious than gold, a reward more decadent than the finest wine.

Lawrence smiled at his own foolishness, tugged on her hand, and pulled her into an embrace.

Then, after that brief moment, they returned to Meyer to tell him they would take on his request.

The hostlers, who took horses along the riverside for those who chose to travel by boat, arrived at the checkpoint a day later. Lawrence received his horse from them and then found a merchant who would be staying at this very checkpoint for a little while longer. He negotiated with this merchant, placed several silver pieces on a contract that would allow him to secure a cart in

Karlan, and managed to borrow a cart off the merchant. Though it was a bit on the older side, they were in no position to be picky.

“An agreement on a single sheet of paper and nothing more than a handshake. Your exchanges are odd, as always.”

Just like that, he made a deal with a stranger to secure an item they were not even sure existed. Exchanges based on the trust among merchants were still an odd sight to Holo, despite how many times she had seen this concept in action.

“But I think the strangest of all those agreements is everlasting love based on nothing more than a kiss.”

Holo, who had been poking at the sacks of powdered sulfur with her foot, did not blush at that statement, of course. She only scoffed.

“Aye. I have certainly been taken in by someone’s honeyed words, have I not?”

“I believe you are being delivered the exact product you signed for in the contract, ma’am,” Lawrence said as he began to load the cart bed after tying up the horse, and Holo gave a dauntless smile.

She then leaped into the cart.

“I suppose it could be worse. Especially considering the situation.”

She leaned her knees against the edge of the cart, resting her elbows on them so she could prop up her chin with her palms. A suggestive smile crossed her face.

“It will be worth the hard work.”

After she cheerfully flashed her canines, she finally began to grab sacks of sulfur and helped place them on the bed of the cart.

Once they were done, Meyer arrived on horseback.

“Have all your preparations been completed?”

“Yes. Lead the way.”

Holo, who had sat down on the driver’s perch before him, scooted to the side to give him room. Lawrence climbed up and took the reins.

It was clear from the get-go that Meyer was a ranger for good reason—he handled his horse with incredible skill.

Though he spent all his days on horseback, roaming the woods, he only looked like a simple peasant on the outside. In reality, he was a vassal who directly served the nobility. The shortbow on his back was not for show, either; whenever he spotted a wild rabbit, he drew his bow and shot it from horseback. Even the most skilled hunters would not be able to accomplish such a feat without special training. Not to mention that it was also a martial art that had use in battle. It was not hard to imagine him mercilessly feathering any intruders he came across in the forest, and he likely knew his way around a blade as well.

It was also notable that he did not ride alongside Lawrence and Holo as they traveled, likely because he often acted as a guide when his lord went out hunting in the woods.

The ranger basically treated them like nobility. He hurried ahead to check the roads, brought any rabbits he hunted to the inns they passed, and even arranged for a meal and lodging with the innkeepers. As night approached, he took them to a small church in a nearby town, where they had a lovely evening with a mild-mannered old priest.

If Lawrence were on his own, the best he would have been able to manage would be finding a cheap inn full of lice and fleas, camping outside by the fire, or borrowing a straw bed if they happened upon a village. Even that was only possible if they were lucky.

There were plenty of very good reasons why Holo was reluctant to travel over land.

“I am beginning to wish we had an attendant of our own,” Holo said the next morning once they left the church.

It was likely an allusion to how Lawrence had taken so long to start a fire when they first left the mountains of Nyohhira, but Lawrence decided to pretend not to hear it for the sake of harmony in their family.

After a while of traveling, Meyer eventually got down from his horse ahead of them. As Lawrence turned his attention ahead, he spotted a dilapidated bridge

over a small stream.

“This is quite old,” he remarked. “Is there anywhere we could cross on foot?”

The stream beneath the bridge was nothing more than a long, thin puddle—calling it a *river* would be much too flattering—but the water itself was surprisingly clear. The water’s edge was thick with grasses, some spots home to small copses. It was at this moment that Lawrence realized that, at some point, the flat plains had vanished and given way to hills and trees.

“Water wells quite frequently in this area, so there are many brooks such as this one,” Meyer explained. “I’ve heard that there was once a great river that flowed through here in my grandfather’s grandfather’s time.”

Lawrence immediately knew he was talking about the great serpent, said to have been cut down by a great hero.

Though he had not been conscious of it, it seemed that the river that once existed near Salonia flowed into this land.

“The ground is damp wherever you go, so a failed crossing could mean getting a cart wheel stuck in the mud, forcing a stop.”

Lawrence nodded and glanced to Holo.

With an annoyed sigh, Holo clambered down from the driver’s perch and began unloading all the sulfur they had packed back at the checkpoint.

“May God help us.”

Lawrence pretended not to notice the scowl on Holo’s face as he made a rather genuine prayer to the heavens, pulling horse and empty cart across the bridge.

He could feel sweat trickling down his temples at the ominous creaking of the bridge below him as he came to realize one reason why Tonneburg managed to preserve such a vast forest. Though there were no big mountains in the area, the land was not flat, either. Ponds and rivers also dotted the landscape. This kind of land could not be turned into arable fields, and ground where drainage was poor meant disease spread more easily—in other words, it was not suitable for human settlements. The geography also made it very difficult to attack in

wartime.

That the land was so difficult to use played a role in why Tonneburg had managed to keep the forest largely untouched until this day.

“Seems like we made it across.”

Lawrence would not be the least bit surprised if, on their way back, they found the bridge collapsed and starting its new life as a home for the small fish and shrimp that lived there. The reason Meyer always went ahead to check the roads was intended to be a deliberate show of kindness, but it was also because the terrain was genuinely dangerous to traverse.

“Let us be off. We’re almost there.”

Though this was a far cry from a relaxing journey, the reason Holo was not terribly upset about it was perhaps because of the smells of the rich earth and water—the scent of the deep forest hung over them. It was potent enough that Lawrence could smell it, too.

It was not long after that Meyer, who had set off ahead at a quicker pace, came into view again, standing at a fork in the road. One path continued on south, while the other looked like a small game trail that curved westward. At the far end of the latter, Lawrence could see the dark, dense wood.

Tonneburg was comprised of several small villages that surrounded the forest, and one of them acted as the heart of the territory. Incidentally, the settlement was big enough to have its own market. Lord Tonneburg’s manor sat apart from the villages, on the bank of a pond to the south of the forest.

The road Meyer had used to bring them here led to the largest village.

That said, the road was barely recognizable as one, and it did not seem that merchants and travelers often came from the outside world.

As Meyer guided them down the path, Lawrence and Holo noticed a person along the road.

A lone old man sat on a tree stump, and the moment he spotted the two of them, he rose to his feet. Evidently, he had been waiting for them.

Meyer told them that he was the mayor of the village they would be entering

soon.

“Ah, there you are! The merchants that come to our market have spoken of you. You solve business problems with magic!”

“Magic? Oh, no. Only God’s guidance.”

It would only cause problems for Lawrence later down the line if a superstitious village believed he was genuinely a wizard, but the look on the mayor’s face made it seem like his village was on the brink of collapse. He ignored Meyer’s introduction and began to speak, clearing his throat.

“If all the trees are cut down, then we cannot maintain our livelihood. And that’s not all—a great calamity will befall the entire region if this comes to pass!”

His speech was exaggerated, like a pastor giving a sermon. Though Holo gave a docile nod, Lawrence wore a merchant’s mask.

A merchant who took every hyperbolic proclamation at face value was worse than useless, and the mayor seemed sensitive to that.

“It is not mere parable, Great Merchant.”

Lawrence showed his shock, and the elderly man’s glassy eyes bore straight into him.

“Our lord understands nothing. How are our pigs and goats supposed to grow fat if he cuts down our forest? And does he understand what sort of state that would lead to?!”

Meyer did not stick around to rein in the mayor, who leaned in as he talked to Lawrence and Holo; their ranger had, as always, gone ahead to check the roads.

After glancing briefly in his direction, Lawrence asked, “...Pigs?”

In all honesty, he had assumed the old man was concerned about the potential clear-cutting because of a pagan attachment to the woods. That and complaints about being forced into hard labor when the clearing process began in earnest.

Yet what came out of his mouth was talk of goats and pigs, which Lawrence had not been expecting.

Satisfied by his bewilderment, the mayor gave a deep nod.

“The villagers speak of the forest’s bounty, but the honey and nuts one can find among the trees is a trivial matter. Even the lumber is not the greatest thing the forest provides. What we cannot afford to lose is the nameless undergrowth.”

Lawrence could not bring himself to put on a fake smile or offer amicable agreement; instead, he found himself glancing at Holo for her wisdom. But even Holo, who was supposed to be thoroughly knowledgeable on all things regarding the forest, simply looked back at him with a quizzical expression.

“The forest undergrowth is what keeps our goats and our pigs fed. You must know that the horses pulling precious cargo for traveling merchants like yourself—those all-important beasts of burden—are raised on oats that grow wild in the forest.”

Wild oats that were too much like grass for human consumption were sold as horse feed. Lawrence knew that, of course.

“If the undergrowth vanishes, then goat milk and pork will not be the only things we lose. You came from Salonia, yes? You must have seen the impressive fields of wheat they have over there.”

For the third time, the conversation took another wild turn, and vexed, Lawrence struggled to find the words.

“Er, yes... They truly were impressive...”

“Yes, yes they are. But our Lord Tonneburg also does not understand that all the wheat fields around Salonia thrive on livestock manure.”

It was as though the old man had been pruned of all of his excess after many long years of farm labor. There was powerful conviction in the way the mayor spoke, and he wielded a persuasiveness that was hard to resist.

Lawrence, too, had once traveled the world as a peddler, the kind of person who in a sense also worked to support the bottom rungs of society, and was confident that he had seen all the fine detail the world had to offer.

But what the mayor was talking about was something that supported the

world from its very root, something that would never enter a traveling merchant's view.

“Those who never sully their hands with dirt could never imagine the sheer amount of grazing needed to keep the livestock fed. The grasses that grow in fallow fields and plains could never be enough. It is the Tonneburg Woods that single-handedly provide what other territories lack. If Lord Tonneburg understood how hard we work, how much we trade in livestock manure, then he would look to the heavens in astonishment and exclaim how rich in trade his land is!”

All merchants could see were the final products that came to market. Even merchants who dealt in herring egg futures never handled livestock manure, much less gave a first or second thought to pig or goat feed. As far as they were concerned, livestock simply lived off the land, and there was no need to deliberately spend money to feed them.

As Lawrence failed to find his words, he stared at Meyer, who had failed to mention any of this back at the checkpoint. Perhaps the easygoing atmosphere surrounding the merchants and travelers at the checkpoint was so powerful that he was convinced talk of rich soil would go unheard and unheeded.

There was always a suitable time and place for any topic.

And that was never truer than this moment now.

The shrewd Meyer at last spoke.

“Sir Lawrence, while part of my role entails protecting the forest from illicit logging, my main responsibility is actually to make sure no one lets their livestock roam and graze on the grasses without express permission.”

“Livestock manure is gold for the fields. Whether scattered seeds of wheat yield three or seven times the amount planted depends entirely upon whether or not the field has been treated with a veritable deluge of manure. And the quality of that manure is affected by how much the livestock has been fed.”

It was not unusual to find wheat fields that only produced three times the amount of seed planted. That was only enough to feed the farmhands because after setting aside the seed needed for planting the next year, nothing would be

left. A year of bad harvests would plunge many farmers into immediate poverty. Regions known as breadbaskets that lined their market stalls with heavy-laden bags of wheat needed a yield that was five times greater than the amount of seed they planted. Even lands known for being fertile would thank God for a rich harvest that offered sevenfold yields.

Lawrence finally managed to understand this with the knowledge he gleaned from his days as a traveling merchant only because it strayed close to the markets, which he understood well. To think that fertilizing the land with livestock manure was *this* important, and that the forest's undergrowth was critical to raising livestock.

He had spent quite some time traveling from village to village dealing in wheat during his merchant days, so Lawrence thought he knew everything there was to know, but it turned out there was plenty he had not learned about at all.

"If Lord Tonneburg proceeds with cutting down the forest, then not only will we be forced to contribute labor, but the forest will lose its undergrowth, the livestock in the area will grow skinny, the wheat fields will wither like a dried-up river, and all of us will lose our livelihoods."

Holo, who had spent centuries in a wheat field, understood where the conversation was going from the very beginning, and in all likelihood had subtly turned Lawrence toward this problem.

When that thought crossed his mind and Lawrence looked to the side, he saw Holo glowering at him from atop the driver's perch.

He thought she might be angry about the danger to the wheat fields, but from the way she refused to meet his gaze had him belatedly realizing something else—farming techniques that used livestock manure were more beyond a spirit of the forest than a merchant like Lawrence.

Then he recalled how, after commanding the harvest in Pasloe for centuries, she had been rendered obsolete and had practically been chased out due to advancements in human agriculture. The mayor still rambled fervently about tree types and how the undergrowth grew in relation to them, and the relationship between livestock grazing periods and the wheat harvest, but not

once did God come up.

The era in which people left offerings in the dark, sunless forest to pray for a good harvest had long since passed. Holo was more than ready to protect the forest, but the forest was no longer home to beings like her.

“Do you understand, Great Merchant?”

This brought Lawrence back to the moment, and his gaze turned from Holo to the mayor.

“The Tonneburg Woods supports the wheat harvest at its very foundations in every place reachable from here by cart. But our lord has forgotten how the land operates and has been taken for a ride by those blasted sea dwellers,” the mayor spat.

Meyer added, “Seaside ports operate on vastly different logic from landlocked settlements. To them, wheat is but one of many products that pass through their walls. They likely think they can simply import wheat from overseas with their boats to sell them at a high price during years of bad harvest.”

To Lawrence, who once gladly took on whatever product he thought might make him a quick profit and carted them from town to town, this statement was a bit hard to swallow.

“But the reason Lord Tonneburg made an agreement with Karlan is, well... there is a sort of rationale to it.”

Just as Meyer spoke, the crude road—nothing but cut grass to mark where one was meant to walk—became the familiar sight of packed earth, and Lawrence caught sight of small clearings and farmland along the treeline.

It seemed the local wheat harvest ended long before Salonia’s—perhaps they reaped the wheat earlier.

“It is not just our lumber that Karlan is after. They want to build a road through the forest and change the maps.”

“The maps?” Lawrence asked in turn.

As he did, the center of the village came into view. In the center square stood a modest market, stalls lined with harvested grain and other miscellaneous

vegetables, as well as honey and the bounty of fruit trees harvested from the forest. A great number of people and carts packed the rows, more than the size of the market might've suggested.

It was the familiar sight of a small, yet lively farming village.

"Lord Tonneburg wants to sacrifice the forest to ensure this market remains on the map."

As Lawrence began to nod, he realized something was strange about that statement.

"But if the forest is cut down, then this place would vanish, too."

Though the village sat beside a deep, dense forest, it did not seem as though its main industry revolved around lumber. What supported its economy was the forest's fertility, which greatly benefited the soil and the livestock.

"Lord Tonneburg believes the scent of wheat and honey can be replaced with metal and coal."

"Those metalworking shops will fill this entire region with the smell of burning wheat fields."

Meyer had mentioned that Lord Tonneburg had made a miscalculation at the checkpoint tavern.

And that miscalculation would not only affect the Tonneburg Woods, but also the vast majority of Salonia's wheat fields.

At last, Lawrence began to understand—this was one appraisal that they could not afford to get wrong.

CHAPTER TWO



CHAPTER TWO

The situation called for extreme caution. It was unusual for the village to receive visitors, much less outsiders who had come for the sole purpose of dismantling their lord's plans.

Lawrence had the sense that even the head of the village, who had come with Meyer to welcome Lawrence and Holo, viewed the two of them as a necessary evil. That was probably why he described Lawrence resolving trade disputes as magic.

And so Lawrence would be staying in the village as a guest of the church, just as traveling merchants who came to trade did.

The priest was the perfect picture of a good-natured old man. He welcomed Lawrence and Holo without ulterior motives and knew of what happened in Salonia as though it were common knowledge. He was eager to hear about the legendary independent priest who built a trout hatchery, and so Lawrence told him of Bishop Rahden, who hailed from warm seas.

Lawrence was hoping to hear more details about the village and the forest from the priest, but the old man was a fervent believer first and foremost; though the villagers respected him, he was not at all knowledgeable about the village or the region's economy. "All I hope for is peace for the souls of Lord Tonneburg and his people," he said sadly. Had Elsa been there, she would have rolled her eyes at this, especially since she traveled all over to reform poorly run churches.

And so, dinner was delightful, but ended fruitlessly.

Holo seemed unsatisfied with the scant servings of meat at the serene meal. The moment she settled down in their guest room, she immediately undid her pack to fish out some jerky.

But she was not as cheerful as she usually was; she only silently sipped on the

mead Meyer had gifted her.

Though the forest was still in danger, the villagers were not particularly worried about the forest itself, much less the spirits that might have dwelled there. Their greatest concern was the livestock manure. Though she knew it was unreasonable to get angry over this, it was still enough reason for her to sulk.

In contrast, Lawrence had only just begun to understand the weight of the situation. And to make up for what he believed was a lacking dinner, he had gone to the priest to borrow something from him.

“What is it you’ve borrowed?” Holo asked dubiously, peering at what he unfolded over the writing desk.

“A map.”

Meyer had mentioned that the port city of Karlan was hoping to redraw the maps. He had also mentioned that Lord Tonneburg had decided to cut down the forest in order to preserve the lively village market.

The trick to trade was considering things while standing in another’s shoes.

“People always gather in churches for one reason or another. Church maps will always be reliable.”

“What am I looking at?”

Not many people could read letters, and that mostly held true for maps as well. The majority of people never left the village where they were born, so they never had any need to look at a map. That was especially true for a wolf who never lost her way even in the darkest forests at night, who only needed to bound up the side of a mountain to find its peak and gaze into the distance to confirm exactly where she was going.

Yet Holo had read her fair share of maps on countless occasions because she had sat side by side with Lawrence, gazing at them under candlelight.

“This is way is north, and this is the river we came down by boat. We then went south, and we should be around here now.”

The river that flowed from Salonia spanned the map from right to left,

running across the top. Salonia stood on the rightmost edge, and downstream—on the leftmost edge of the map—sat what was likely the port town of Karlan. At the bottom of the map, south of the forest, was what looked like a large pond or a lake and a small drawing of what was likely the ruling lord's manor. Below that, farther south, was a road that ran east to west, marking the bottom of the map.

Occupying everything between the north and south edges of the map was an all-consuming gray mass—the forest.

The village in which they were staying sat right on the northeastern edge of the massive forest.

“According to Meyer, they want to cut down the forest so they can build a road that goes south.”

An uncomfortably loud *crack* came from inside Holo's mouth—she must have bitten into an errant piece of cartilage in the jerky.

The candlelight shone in her red eyes, and her canines gleamed.

“Fools,” she said, ripping into a new piece of jerky.

“In a merchant's eyes, Karlan and Lord Tonneburg's plans do make sense.”

The forest spread from the northeast to the southwest, dotted in places by what Lawrence surmised to be hills by name alone. This was not an easy wood to cross, and the seven or so villages in the area sat outside the forest. The only two settlements among the trees sat just inside the perimeter—the forest was truly untouched.

This map was marked with paths to show where church visitors should visit next, and all these paths took great winding detours around the forest.

“This is Karlan, the port city. And I guess at the bottom here, this area south of the forest must be a pond or a lake. Either way, there's another small river flowing south from there. And that means if they manage to cut a path through the forest and build a road to the lake, they could easily carry cargo from north to south by boat. And voilà—a convenient trade route.”

If there were a road that went from the north of the forest to the southern

lake, then they could build a pier there, along with warehouses to store cargo and inns to house travelers. Merchants would naturally follow. And due to the dense woods, they would not lack material to raise buildings and build boats. Setting up charcoal-burning huts and smithies would be the first thought of any merchant.

The road would connect north and south, opening the way to seaports—it was the perfect trade route for exporting metal, charcoal, and lumber. Lawrence could easily imagine the booming business the village would see.

“If people use the road, then the landlord can collect taxes. Lumber will sell like hotcakes. Before long, new villages would pop up and the population would grow. This map would change dramatically.”

Holo’s tail swished back and forth in displeasure.

“But it was said that if they do not accept this plan, then the fires of this village will be snuffed out. Why is that?”

She pointed to the village in which she and Lawrence were staying.

If he were to look out the window, he might be able to see the tip of a giant shapely finger.

“That would be because of where Karlan is located. See, look at the forest—” Lawrence pointed at the Tonneburg Woods. “Picture an even bigger map, one that contains the woods and everything around it. This forest stands in the way of Karlan doing any trade with landlocked communities. They have no choice but to rely on the river flowing from Salonia, but that’s also obvious to the lords who hold land along the river.”

Holo lifted her head, then nodded. “They are under their thumbs.”

Even if ships could reach their harbor, Karlan would have no choice but to watch the products in their warehouses rot if they were unable to do trade with the villages and towns farther inland. The only easy path into the rest of the continent was that river, and if Lawrence were one of the landlords along the river, then he would capitalize on that leverage without a second thought and levy heavy taxes at his checkpoint.

That was precisely why Karlan wanted a different path that would allow them

easy access to the rest of the continent.

Holo played with the piece of jerky sticking out of her mouth.

“If Lord Tonneburg were to turn down Karlan’s proposal, then the new road would have to take a large detour around the western edge of the forest. They probably used this to threaten the lord.” Lawrence traced a finger along the left side of the map. “A new road on the western side of the forest would completely divert the small, but steady, trickle of merchants that pass through this village on their way south. The merchants from Karlan, at the very least, would have no reason to come to the eastern side of the forest, especially when their return trip would require traveling by river with high travel tolls. And so trade that only existed because merchants incidentally stopped by would vanish, and the villagers would have to venture elsewhere to sell their wares. And that’s doubly true when there aren’t any decent roads.”

Holo quietly chewed on her jerky, which was still sticking out of her mouth. She was likely thinking back on the rickety bridge they had to cross to get here.

“That said, I’m sure there are reasons why Karlan doesn’t necessarily want to build a road that runs along the western edge of the forest. If there weren’t any, then it would probably be under construction right now.”

It was hard to tell due to how the map was cut off, but Lawrence was almost certain there already existed a road somewhere toward the coast. If that road and the new one were too close, then it would invite conflict with the lords who owned the lands along the coastal route, among other problems.

It was likely that Karlan had recently gained ambitions to develop and flourish as a port city. But it was surrounded on all sides by powerful individuals who were already well established—there was not much room for Karlan to carve out a niche.

In his mind, Lawrence pictured a child who was physically growing, but was uncomfortable due to their small clothes.

“Building a new road isn’t very easy to begin with,” Lawrence said, his gaze dropping to the flask of mead in Holo’s hands. She glumly handed Meyer’s gift to him. After a sip, he returned it to her and continued. “It’s easy to collect taxes on a river, but that isn’t the case with regular roads. And so landlords

typically make up for the cost of building those roads and their maintenance by forcing the commonfolk who live nearby to work on it. Those people have no choice in the matter—they typically spend three or four days a week laboring with absolutely no compensation. And in the meantime, their fields go neglected, and their lives get harder. I honestly thought they were going to tell me that their village was going to die out because of these troubles.”

But all the mayor talked about was the cycle of the livestock, the manure that fertilized the wheat fields, and the forest that supported the livestock.

“What we know so far makes it seem like even if they are forced to work on the development of the land, it won’t be so bad. That means Lord Tonneburg is probably a better person than we think, and that he has little intention of exploiting the villagers. But in that case, something else will have to make up the difference.”

Holo brought the flask to her lips but did not drink. Her intelligent eyes stared at the map.

“Building a road is hard enough under normal circumstances. It’s that much more difficult to do in heavily forested land. At the same time, they’ll get quite a lot of lumber from cutting down trees to make room for the road. And they could easily make up for the cost of building the road after factoring in the profits that will be generated by the smithies and other things that come later. Karlan seems to be especially keen on getting lumber, so even if they compromise on a great deal with Lord Tonneburg, they probably thought it all added up. And from Lord Tonneburg’s perspective, he probably thought it would be more beneficial to take them up on this proposal instead of watching helplessly as a new road wraps around the forest...even if it means losing a part of the forest’s wealth.”

“Mm.”

“And Meyer seems to be a skilled ranger. I bet Lord Tonneburg already asked him to find the best route through the forest.”

It was then that he and the Karlan council saw they could both profit from this and decided to work together.

“That’s what things look like in the merchant’s world,” Lawrence said. “What

does the wolf think?”

Holo huffed a little sigh at the question, readjusting her position on the bed. She then whipped her head to the side, ripping apart the sinewy jerky in her mouth; the only times she ever really acted wolflike in this manner was when she was in a bad mood.

“Only the most witless of fools would build a road here.”

Lawrence looked at the map, and then to Holo. “You mean like how the mayor explained?”

Everyone would lose everything the forest had to offer. Even if Holo did not quite understand how the manure from free-roaming livestock fertilized wheat fields, she was intimately familiar with how the plants in the forest grew after watching them for countless years.

“Humans will walk here, they will burn charcoal along the paths, and then create metal, no? At that point, the road ceases to be a simple path in the forest. It divides one wood in two, creating entirely separate places.” Noticing Lawrence’s weak response, Holo continued with a sigh. “Shall we consider the fox?”

“The fox?”

“You merchants think of the land in your reliance for roads for your cargo. That makes you a cat. Cats claim the paths that go from house to house.”

Interested, Lawrence turned his chair to face Holo completely.

“These landowning lords are stereotypical mutts. They draw the lines on their papers telling everyone precisely what belongs to them.”

“And what about the foxes?”

“Foxes appear to be like both, but they are exceptionally greedy. They cannot live in smaller forests. Splitting a large wood in twain does not create two territories. It will simply be too small for the foxes, and then they will no longer have any place to live.”

Huh. Lawrence was impressed, but he was not entirely sure how this was relevant. Sensing this, Holo looked at him like he was a disappointing

apprentice.

“No foxes means more rats, and without any predators, the fawns will thrive.”

“Hmm. I guess you’re right.”

“An excess of deer and mice means saplings shall be eaten away, and that will cause the forest to grow thin. All that will remain will be higher trees that are covered in needly leaves, making the wood dark and quiet. ’Tis not a suitable wood for fattening pigs and goats.”

The needly-leafed trees she mentioned were likely conifers. Broad-leafed trees, ones that struggled to reach greater heights, made easy meals for deer and other critters of the forest, so only the taller coniferous trees could survive uncontrolled booms of wildlife. And when the canopy inevitably started blocking sunlight from reaching the forest floor, new grasses would not grow there. Just as the mayor so passionately proclaimed, it would have a huge impact on the undergrowth that indirectly supported the wheat fields.

“’Twould look like a nice acorn—one full of holes that has most certainly been hollowed out by pests.”

If a road cut through the forest, with charcoal-burning huts and smithies built along it, and Karlan’s lumber was felled here instead of being brought in from Salonia, then the forest’s interior would change drastically.

It was very much the same as an insect burrowing through an acorn and consuming the insides.

“From my point of view, forests such as these will eventually come back to life given enough time.”

From the way she spoke, Lawrence knew right away that she was speaking about spans of time that were far beyond the scope of human lives.

It naturally showed that what the mayor and Meyer were saying was no exaggeration.

“But Meyer must’ve explained that to Lord Tonneburg, right?” Lawrence asked.

In response, Holo only took a silent sip from the flask. She must have also

thought that, considering his skill, Meyer was aware of all of this.

That meant either the topic was too foreign for the lord to comprehend, or he understood and still decided it could not turn out *that* badly and went ahead with Karlan's proposal anyway. Whatever the truth, that led a very vexed Meyer to throw himself at Lawrence and Holo's mercy after spotting them in Salonia.

Lawrence sighed and stood from his chair. Once he sat down beside the sullen wolf, he unfolded himself to lay on the bed.

As he stared at the ceiling, Holo peered down at him with an indescribable expression.

"It's honestly a good plan, at least on paper."

And that was why Lord Tonneburg decided to go along with it. While there were some concerning details, a deal without apprehensions was either a scam or had simply not been examined thoroughly enough. It was hard to consider the lord's decision a foolish one.

Meyer had asked Lawrence to fix his lord's miscalculations, somehow persuading him that the plan itself was not viable at all.

Then what is it they must do to protect both forest and wheat fields?

Lawrence heaved a great sigh, and his eyes darted to Holo's face as she remained sitting.

Holo was sharp—she noticed his gaze right away, and her ears straightened.

But since she did not turn to look at him, Lawrence spoke.

"Just to be clear, I'm not secretly thinking that we've been thrown into a cumbersome problem or anything."

The hairs on Holo's tail stiffened, like a rabbit taking a deep breath.

"Even a dog will find a bone if it goes for a walk, they say."

"....."

Holo peered over her shoulder and greeted him with an unusually deep scowl.

"It's an old human saying. It means that once you act, there will always be

consequences.”

Lawrence gave a small smile as he moved his hand, burying his fingers into the fur of her tail.

She immediately whipped it out of range, bringing it back only to smack the back of his hand.

“Fortune and misfortune are neighbors.” Lawrence repeated the motion, this time tangling his fingers through the fur. “Both good and bad things ebb and flow, like interwoven strands of rope. And the rope itself is sturdy enough to hold what’s most important together.”

As Holo stared at Lawrence’s hand playing with her tail, a look of understanding crossed her expression right before it scrunched into a frown.

“The latter half of that sounds like a falsehood.”

“It’s not a saying *yet*, but I bet it’d really take off in Nyohhira.”

Holo narrowed her eyes and dropped her shoulders, tired.

“You know, I’m glad we came across this problem here. If Salonia’s wheat harvest got worse, then it would eventually start affecting the prices of the wheat we order in Nyohhira. And even if we fail to get through to Lord Tonneburg, we can get ahead of the issue and start thinking about what we can do to prepare.”

There was a special sort of excitement in his voice when he spoke of commerce. Holo listened to him, not once doubting him.

“So long as we don’t make a total mess of this, I think it’ll end in our favor either way.”

Lawrence had told himself falsehoods in order to convince himself to take on Meyer’s request, but what he said now was no lie.

He stopped digging his fingers into Holo’s fur and began to run his palm along the length of her tail.

Though she had fallen behind on maintenance what with all the hangovers and the travel, her tail was still as soft as ever.

She did not like having her tail played with, but despite her grouchy attitude, she relented and allowed him to do as he pleased. Perhaps she felt like she owed him a debt for getting him involved in a problem that seemingly had no solution.

Yet just as it was said that merchants had two tongues, Lawrence did, in fact, have an idea.

He played with the fur on her tail as he gathered his thoughts.

Lawrence did not consider himself exceptionally gifted, but he did have an advantage over other merchants. To be more specific, he had Holo—and because she was at his side, he could approach things from angles other humans could never imagine.

This plot to cut down the forest was among those things.

“I guess the goal is to make it seem like Lord Tonneburg’s calculations are off. That seems manageable enough.”

Holo’s eyes widened.

“Really?”

“Probably. But there’s something we need to check. Tomorrow we’ll talk to Meyer and...”

Lawrence gave a loud yawn as he talked. They had been traveling for days and days, and now faced with his first big problem in a long while, he realized that he had been using his brain more than he had thought.

He knew he had to blow out the candle, close the window, and get under the blankets since the nights were growing colder, but it was too much for him; his eyes remained closed.

But not a moment later the light vanished from beyond his eyelids, and he heard the creak of the window shutters closing. He felt the wooden frame of the bed shift, and soon, he was covered in blankets.

Though this was normally a routine that Lawrence always carried out, there was an exception like this about once a year.

“I am the wolf who presides over the harvest,” Holo murmured beneath the

covers.

That night, Lawrence dreamed he was a seed-bed, buried in the earth.

I must work hard to produce beautiful blossoms, he thought.

Lawrence joined the old priest in morning prayer, said a word of thanks as he munched on the stale bread that sat on the altar as an offering to God, then entered Meyer's care.

After a simple meal with the old priest, the ranger brought some freshly baked bread from the village's communal kiln, which was likely the standard way they treated their ruling lord when he stayed in the village.

"I also thought there must be something I could show you to help you, Sir Lawrence," Meyer said to him, smiling at Holo as they walked around the village in the early hours, watching her bite into a loaf as big as her head.

"So...you'd like to see the village smithy?"

Though it seemed as though he wanted to suggest that visiting the village market or the wheat fields might bring them closer to the core of the problem, Lawrence only nodded in response.

"Of course."

Meyer looked worried that Lawrence might not fully grasp what the mayor told him the day before, but Lawrence had business in the smithy. Unable to turn him down, Meyer led the two of them into the forest.

A smithy used a great amount of water and wood, so many of them were often situated among the trees.

"And yes, last night, the father was gracious enough to allow me to study a map of the area. If that map is to be trusted, then I believe Lord Tonneburg's decision was a sound one."

Meyer nodded.

Lawrence continued, "Am I correct in assuming that the port of Karlan is desperate to build a road headed inland so that it may develop further?"

"You are. Karlan has a good port, but their only lifeline to the rest of the

continent is the river you traveled a few days past, all because these woods sit in the way. But..." Meyer faltered as a herd of sheep and goats cut across their path.

The villager following the livestock offered Meyer a polite greeting—it was likely they were about to venture into the forest.

"I question whether people would use a road that cuts through the forest in the first place, in all honesty."

The mayor might have been different, but Meyer was not only thinking of the forest's devastation, but also possible mistakes in Lord Tonneburg's calculations.

"You don't think profits will be as high as what Karlan has promised Lord Tonneburg?"

Said lord was expecting quite a tidy profit from various sources in exchange for cutting down the valuable forest. Merchants from Karlan would use the new road, and the tolls levied from their passage were projected to be very lucrative indeed.

"A path through the woods will seem convenient at first, yes. One can get on near the stream at the southern edge of the forest, then travel all the way to the Roef River. But there are no towns of note along the way, and even though the larger cities of Kerube and Lenos sit down and upriver respectively, Lenos is more akin to Kerube's loyal servant, and Kerube is like a mean-spirited older brother to Karlan. They are both port cities who deal in similar goods."

That reminded Lawrence of the rope analogy he gave Holo the night before.

Towns had their own commercial areas, and those territories were comparable to the turf of cats and dogs.

There was a limited supply for exported and imported goods, and the one who could secure the most was the winner.

"Kerube will not take kindly to Karlan trying to intrude on their territory. And the reason Karlan does not want to use a road on the western edge of the forest, one that passes near the sea, is because that would put them inside Kerube territory, and the disputes over tariffs would be endless."

All that Lawrence had guessed after analyzing the map was mostly correct.

And Meyer, too, seemed to believe that Karlan was perfectly aware of all of this.

If that was true, then the kind Lord Tonneburg was being duped, and he would wind up with the short end of the stick.

Meyer's sharp hunter's eyes had latched onto that possibility.

"But I am no merchant. If I were to say such a thing, my lord would not heed my warning. It would be like me giving advice on how to fish in the ocean—hardly convincing."

Who said what was extremely important.

"And the forest undergrowth and wheat are topics far too mystifying for him. Only those who spend most of their time among the trees, within the fields, and beneath the vast sky will understand."

Trade and commerce helped reveal many of the invisible chains that linked everything together. Lawrence, too, could practically feel the physical sensation of what Meyer spoke beneath his fingers—he understood the concepts well enough. And more importantly, Holo herself was a forest dweller.

But Lawrence did not feel particularly pessimistic, despite what Meyer was saying. He was rather confident that, if he acted on what he thought about as he petted Holo's tail the previous night, then he could plant the seed of doubt in Lord Tonneburg.

As they followed Meyer's lead away from the village, there was an abrupt stop in the line of buildings, and the trees grew thick. After they climbed a gentle slope, they found themselves in the deep forest.

The paths around the village were comprised of packed earth, ones where a single pebble would stand out sorely. But it was soon grass that cushioned their footsteps, which then became a carpet of humus. And there was yet another layer of dried foliage on top of that, which made them feel like they were walking on clouds.

The air was moist in the morning forest; if Lawrence closed his eyes, he could

easily picture himself back in Nyohhira. But the scent here was different. When that thought crossed his mind, he heard a rustle of leaves above him, and when he looked up, he spotted a squirrel running along the branches of the trees. A foolish little mouse darted out from beneath the dried leaves at his feet, rushing to hide in a nearby tree. This forest was teeming with much more life than the ones surrounding Nyohhira.

They walked for a while, and Lawrence spoke with Meyer along the way, but when Meyer went ahead to check the roads just as he did the day before, Holo murmured, “’Tis a good forest.”

“This apparently used to be a river.”

The path, carefully cleared of trees, was more sunken into the ground than the rest of the earth around it. Whenever it rained, the water slowly scraped away at the ground, forming a ditch, and even the river that formed as a result could change its flow as a result of fallen trees and leaf accumulation. At some point, Holo had told him in the deep mountains of Nyohhira that the forest was everchanging, and he could see that the Tonneburg Woods were undoubtedly full of life.

According to what Meyer said, the Tonneburg Woods and its environs had a lot of springwater, and it was likely due to that there were a lot of undulations in its geography.

If they were to build a road here, it would likely follow the bends of this old river. And now that Lawrence had seen the forest for himself, he was confident in his prediction.

It would likely go well if they followed through on the plan.

Whether Holo knew what Lawrence was thinking or not, she did not ask for details when dawn broke, nor did he explain. He wanted a specific situation to help him explain.

As they passed beneath the tree cover, Lawrence felt like he had become a little mouse. Eventually, they spotted the road ahead of them drenched in sunlight. There was a clearing in the dense forest where a quiet pond sat—the perfect place for a witch to live.

And sitting beside the pond were two buildings nestled side by side—old, sagging, and covered in moss.

“What an awful smell,” Holo complained.

Lawrence chuckled. As they neared the building with Meyer at their side, he could tell right away that it smelled of charcoal and metal. It was different from the scents of the forest; this smell scraped at the inside of his nostrils.

“Well, if it isn’t Meyer!”

One of the two buildings was more like a covered shed without any walls. Beneath it sat ironware that was no longer functional and a mound of coal. Practically buried beneath it all was a middle-aged man working, steam rising from his bare torso.

“Another busy day, smith?”

“You bet. Any spare moment I got makes me think the forest is gonna swallow me whole.”

The smith glanced back over his shoulder and peeled off his thick leather gloves before appraising Lawrence and Holo.

“Guess you haven’t brought me apprentices?”

With a huff, Holo turned away—a gesture, perhaps, done on behalf of all the forest dwellers in the world. Lawrence gave a nod and a smile in greeting instead.

“This is traveling merchant Lawrence and his wife. He will be on our side regarding the forest road.”

When Meyer introduced them, the smith gave a nod in understanding. “My apologies, then. It’s mighty smoky out here. Let’s talk inside.”

He must have thought Holo was upset because she did not appreciate the metallic smoke that rose from the furnace.

The smith opened the door to the neighboring building and stepped inside. Meyer followed after him, and as Lawrence moved to do the same, he realized Holo did not. He turned to look at her.

For a moment, he thought it was because she did not want to step into a smith's house, but she was instead staring distantly into the trees.

It was almost as though her friends of the forest were calling to her.



“Holo,” Lawrence said her name a bit forcefully. “Don’t leave me.”

Absently, she turned around to look at him.

“I have too much jerky to eat all by myself.”

Light soon returned to those red eyes that had been peering deep into the distant woods.

For a moment, like a dream, it seemed as though Holo was on the verge of melting into the very forest itself, but her image became sharp and distinct once again.

“Indeed you do. The human world is filled with more delicacies than what the forest can offer.”

Now was not the time for her return to the forest.

Lawrence accompanied Holo as she stepped into the building just as the smith started pouring them mugs of strong ale.

The still was the smith’s pride and joy, something he forged with his own hands. And after draining his mug of homemade ale like it was water, he resentfully spat, “The forest is like a spring. If you take more than what comes out, then it’ll dry up! That’s just common sense!”

The building they were in was terribly old. The smithy itself had likely been in operation for generations, the rights to use this parcel of land passed down as time went on.

Outdated tools sat proudly on the walls. It was unlikely they would be usable in a decade or two.

Lawrence scanned the décor and quickly found what he was looking for. He also noticed how Holo’s expression hardened the moment they stepped inside.

“We’ve got to show Lord Tonneburg that his plan’s wrong, not necessarily to keep the smithy running, but for the sake of the forest.”

Building a road through the forest, extracting lumber, and building new smithies would be a direct encroachment on the smith’s business. It was not particularly surprising that he was against the plan.

“I’ve traveled various lands, and you rarely come across forests like this one. I would like it if they left it as is,” Lawrence said, and the smith nodded in agreement. “That’s why I will be visiting Lord Tonneburg, in hopes that he will reconsider his decision.”

They were sitting in what was essentially the home of every forest dweller’s mortal enemy. At that thought, Lawrence cast a quick glance at a bored Holo before continuing.

“How much labor do you think it will take to establish a new smithy in this forest?”

“A...huh?” That question took the smith by surprise. The expression on his face made it seem like he was being let down. “How much...labor?”

“Yes. I suppose I could rephrase the question and ask how easy you think it would be to build a smithy.”

“Listen, mister merchant. What I mean is that I’d never build a new smithy. That’s silly talk.”

The smith crossed his muscular arms across his chest—he was the very picture of a stubborn forest-dwelling craftsman. Though his mouth was hidden behind a beard singed from the heat of the forge, Lawrence could tell it was curving downward in a frown. The man was imposing.

He was overflowing with pride, like he would never move no matter what happened. Lawrence could practically hear him saying that he always solved his problems by himself and he would continue to do so. Lawrence had not seen any helpers or assistants around, so he would’ve believed the smith.

Besides the tools needed for forging, the room was also home to various other items needed for daily life. There was a pile of rags in the corner indented in the shape of the smith’s physique, which made it immediately clear that he spent most of his time here in this hut.

When Lawrence was just starting out as a merchant, he often did business in places with no other competition, where the roads were so bad that no other merchants dared to venture that way.

And so he was intimately knowledgeable about some things that were

unfathomable to city merchants, the ones who licked the tips of their quills to manipulate numbers and called that “trade.”

One of those things served as the cause of an argument between him and Holo around the time they first met.

And that is exactly what he came here to ask.

“Building a new smithy in the forest and building a new house in the village are two entirely different things. Especially if one wants to maintain it.”

Behind the smith, a great big axe, a scythe, a longsword, a spear, and other things glinted ominously. They seemed like they had seen plenty of use, too much to have been personal projects he hung up in pride—they were tools to fight against the very forest itself as it threatened to swallow the smithy whole.

And wherever there was battle, there were victory trophies.

Hanging proudly on the wall was a magnificent wolf pelt that was roughly the same size as the smith himself.

“City artisans who do not understand how terrifying the forest can be will walk right on in, encumbered by their belongings. Then once they’ve finished building the smithy, they’ll have to work there day in and day out. What do you think? Do you think they’ll be able to greet the morning in one piece?”

The smith followed Lawrence’s gaze and gave a nod in understanding.

“I see—that’s what you mean. There are some city merchants who come to the village and ask me to fix their ironware. That lot just wanders the trees munching on their bread. But I make sure not to give any blades to idiots like them. Nothing’s more dangerous than those who don’t know the forest spending an extended amount of time in it.” The smith looked at Meyer, then turned his attention back to Lawrence. “The forest is in the heart of enemy territory. The smithy has found itself surrounded by wolves on moonless nights more than just once or twice. The reason I don’t keep an assistant around is because I know the kid’ll just get swallowed up by the trees.”

A single lapse in vigilance could mean vanishing forever.

That very thing had likely happened countless times.

“But Meyer,” Lawrence said, turning to the ranger. “I’m certain you’ve already advised Lord Tonneburg on how much it would cost to keep wolves away in order to build the roads and smithies. What do you think?”

Meyer had sat there, looking as though he was ready to speak up, and he nodded as though it was a given.

But the reason he did not speak was because he had realized Lawrence already had the rest of the story.

“I think the reason Lord Tonneburg still agreed to the plan, despite knowing about the wolves, was because he could not really picture the problem. While I imagine he comes to the forest to hunt, he likely does so in camps where he’s surrounded by many beaters and those who are adept at finding their way around the forest, like Meyer.”

After a moment of hesitation, Meyer said, “Sir Lawrence, there *are* wolves in the woods, but I wouldn’t say they are particularly—”

“No, no, Meyer. They *must* be. How could they not? They are *so* dangerous, in fact, that it would take thousands of mercenaries to guard the workers that will be building the road from wolf attacks. The cost of such security will be absurdly high.”

After the bewildering, theatrical speech, Lawrence flashed Meyer and the smith a mischievous grin.

At last they understood what Lawrence meant.

“You want us to pretend there was a wolf attack?”

Lawrence nonchalantly turned to look at Holo before giving his answer. Holo, who had a feeling she was going to be roped into some sort of performance, gave him a look that suggested he was the annoying pebble in her shoe.

“We hail from deep in the mountains of Nyohhira, and droves of skilled hunters roam our area. Even their hunting dogs are often mistaken for wolves in other parts.”

While Lawrence and Holo were out traveling, it was a wolf spirit who was managing the bathhouse in their stead. Her brother and other wolves ran a

monastery a short distance away from Nyohhira, nestled even deeper into the mountains. They managed the place of worship and received hot spring guests who wished to pray, all while maintaining a veil of innocence over themselves. They would gladly take up whatever favor Holo asked of them.

But discussing wolves attacking humans with Holo almost verged on taboo, and if the smith truly felt like he was in harm's way, he would not hesitate to attack. And so Lawrence understood why she did not look so pleased, considering it could easily aggravate the relationship between wolf and human.

Lawrence, however, was a merchant.

He was confident he could sell ice in Nyohhira in the dead of winter.

"Then let us think of it this way," Lawrence said, glancing briefly at Holo. "The wolves of the Tonneburg Woods might be troublesome and cunning in equal measure. But what if they put those sea dwellers in their place and taught them what it takes to survive in these woods? Doesn't that sound exhilarating?"

The smith hummed, and Meyer dipped his head in agreement.

Lawrence redrew the lines of friend and foe.

Even the smith, who considered himself an enemy of the wolves, would side with a fellow forest dweller when it came to making a stand against outsiders. Needless to say, that should have been true for Holo as well.

Wolves were not automatically hostile toward all humans. Things changed drastically if they were fighting alongside the humans of the forest, all to preserve their pride as forest people.

It was not long before the smith said, "It is a good opportunity, yes, to show the sea dwellers just how dangerous the forest can be. I don't want people to think the wolves of the Tonneburg Woods are the same as any old wolves they can find anywhere."

He showed respect for how formidable his enemy was.

Holo observed the smith, an indescribably tickled look on her face.

Lawrence wondered what would have happened if he had brought up this very topic the previous night.

She may have grown fearful about coming into conflict with humans and rejected his plan.

But she, too, should have understood that the smith did not simply hate wolves by watching his reaction. If circumstances were slightly different, they could have been friends.

She eventually gave a weak little sigh—she finally understood that, from the perspective of a wolf, this was not such a terrible idea after all.

“I am a merchant. People hate losing more than they enjoy their profits. There are terrifying and onerous wolves in this forest; once they see with their own eyes that it will cost a fortune to make their road a reality, then the sea dwellers of Karlan *and* Lord Tonneburg will have no choice but to reconsider.”

If they were truly going to build a road through the forest and set up new smithies, then they had quite the extensive survey to conduct. In which case, all Meyer had to do was take the regional lord out hunting under the pretense that the forest would soon grow much louder with the bustle of activity, so he should enjoy this lull before the storm. And once Lord Tonneburg understood the threat the wolves posed, then the cost of making things safe would most certainly push things beyond budget—and that, the lord would be forced to understand.

That was precisely what Lawrence came up with the night previous when he was playing with Holo’s tail.

“What do you think? If both of you can help me with this, then I can immediately send word to all the hunters I know.”

Meyer and the smith exchanged glances, then both turned their attention to the wolf pelt on the wall.

Those who spent much of their time in the forest knew very well the fear that came with seeing a wolf.

“Sir Lawrence.” Meyer approached Lawrence and extended his hand. Lawrence grasped it in return, and the smith himself scooped them both into a big bear hug.

Holo understood the merits of the idea, but somehow she was not quite so

eager about this little scheme.

Both Meyer and the smith ventured into the forest to prepare them a special lunch to pray for the success of their plan. Lawrence remained behind, tasked with starting the fire in the oven meant for food, careful not to ignite Holo's mood with those very flames.

"I'll ask Selim myself," he said.

It would likely weigh heavily on Holo if she were to ask her own kin to act as hunting dogs.

And the kind wolf seemed to have some resistance to the idea of deliberately spooking people.

"Do you think you could ask the wolves of the forest to make sure they don't *actually* hurt anyone? I'll be sure to prepare a reward for them."

Holo was always willing to flash her canines whenever she got the opportunity, but she was surprisingly sensitive when it came to affairs between humans and wolves.

Though she always teased Lawrence for being too softhearted, it was in fact Holo who was the most sensitive about this sort of thing.

"...I believe I have become restless during our first journey in many years."

She sat on a crate and hunched over, tail nervously twitching back and forth; it was likely a sign she now regretted offering her help.

"But we *have* to do this. Otherwise the lord is never going to change his mind," Lawrence said, tossing more kindling into the fire.

However, Holo remained glum. "To think you would suggest such a straightforward plan."

Lawrence turned around to look at her. She greeted him with piercing, narrowed eyes. Though he had thought she had been all right with everything in the end, he figured she must still be angry that he was resorting to her wolf powers.

But that was not quite it. With discontent in her voice, she said, "If you're relying on me now of all times, then I can think of plenty of other times you

could have asked me to help.”

“Huh?”

Lawrence responded quizzically only for Holo to turn away in a huff.

Kindling crackled in the fire, and Lawrence snapped back to the present.

She was not angry that he was asking for their help as wolves.

She was reprimanding him for not taking advantage of what she was fully capable of until now.

“I got your help when we set up the bathhouse, remember?”

It would have been impossible to set up a new bathhouse if they had failed to find new springs. That rule prevented any newcomers from easily joining the ranks of the Nyohhira bathhouses, and the reality was that all of the major springs had already been dug up and claimed.

But Holo’s nose and claws had found them a spring that would have needed a great deal of luck and too much effort if it was being excavated by human hands alone. Just that was enough to make Lawrence feel like he should offer her a fresh apple beside her pillow every day for the rest of his life.

“Besides, I’ve asked you to do all sorts of other things. I’m almost positive.”

He thought back on many trials they had been through together, but Holo’s expression remained glum.

Wearing an expression that was almost identical to one he had seen on the face of their daughter Myuri, Holo said, “It seems you’ve found yourself in a fix at last.”

Lawrence had been trying to be considerate toward Holo, but apparently, she just found it anxiety inducing. And the reason he always landed himself in these fixes was because he wanted to show off for her. But even if she knew this, Lawrence knew that Holo would remain quietly irritated and worried until he finally asked for her help.

She was upset because this was the one time he had been so quick to rely on her.

Lawrence shoved the kindling in the oven around with a stick before saying, “We use the card up our sleeve when it’s the right time to play it, and that applies right now. Look.” He lifted his gaze from the fire and scanned the deep forest that surrounded them. “This is a crossroads where not only the existence of this forest hangs in the balance, but also the future of the wheat fields. Am I right?”

Holo could hear people’s lies. And it seemed she was having trouble deciding whether or not what Lawrence said was untrue. To her, it sounded as though he was trying to change the subject, even though her ears were telling her he was being sincere.

And no matter which it may be, she would remain glum.

“You are a sheep,” she said, “and yet you somehow manage to be so elusive in times like this.”

All Lawrence could say in response was, “Sure. But if I were predictable and boring, you would have given up on me and gone to chew on some other bones a long time ago.”

Holo pursed her lips and widened her eyes. And after a long moment, she sighed.

At last, she gave an exasperated smile, one that was so emblematic of the wisewolf.

“You fool.”

Lawrence simply drew up his shoulders in a shrug. Holo stood from her crate and sat down beside him instead.

That meant she was done being grumpy.

“What will we be eating, I wonder.”

“Probably deer. I doubt being in the forest makes it any easier to hunt, though.”

“There are plenty of rabbits in this wood. And there seems to be plenty of water, which means there will likely be many of those rats with flat tails.”

“Wow, that brings back memories. We haven’t had those in a long time.”

Holo was talking about a large rodent that lived near the water's edge. Its teeth could cut through wood, which it used to make its nests, and it was the main ingredient for a proud and popular dish among members of the clergy, who claimed that because it inhabited the water, its flesh was closer to fish than other meat.

"There are plenty of delicious foods we have yet to try in this world."

"You're right. That said, I should remind you my coin purse is not bottomless."

Holo leaned her head on Lawrence's shoulder and slumped with a frown.

"You are a stingy merchant."

"Always have been."

He grinned at her, and she offered a weary smile in return, then readjusted her head on his shoulder.

Her fluffy tail curled, wrapping around the back of his waist as though holding him closer in a hug.

The quiet forest pondside was filled only with the sound of crackling kindling.

Lawrence watched Holo close her eyes, pleased, and he gave a light sigh.

It seemed as though he would be able to save the Tonneburg Woods from danger—which was a problem entirely of his own creation, after he worked a little too hard in Salonia. Though it was not quite as bad as Holo's hangovers, he knew he should reflect on his actions.

Just as he wondered whether or not his thoughts had reached her, the tail around him suddenly retracted and she stood up. He did not need to watch her to know that she had pulled her hood over her head and covered her tail with the long hem of her coat.

Meyer and the smith had likely returned with their game.

But when he turned to look, Lawrence spotted a figure coming down the road on the path leading toward the village.

Meyer and the smith were there, of course. But both of them seemed grim, almost as though the hunters had become the hunted—and it did not take long

for Lawrence to see that was indeed the case.

Because behind them, sitting majestically on horseback, was clearly the lord and his entourage.

“So you are the merchant I have heard so much about.”

The tone and gaze that came from atop the horse made Lawrence instinctively search for an escape route.

“I heard you have some objections about how I manage my territory.”

Both Meyer and the smith hung their heads. On either side of the lord’s horse stood two conscripted farmers, both wearing leather armor that seemed unnatural on their persons and meekly holding spears.

And then there was the good-natured old priest, who seemed anxious.

It was clear who made the report to the lord, and it was not realistic for him to escape now.

Lawrence stood, as though protecting Holo, and graciously bowed his head.

“My name is Kraft Lawrence.”

The graying lord gave a deep sigh, powerful enough for the hairs on his beard to shudder, and then dismounted his horse.

Though the lord did not smile, he did introduce himself politely.

“I am Matthias Egil Tonneburg.”

While Lawrence was unsure at first whether or not he needed to kneel, Lord Matthias waited only a brief moment to jerk his chin in his direction.

“I’m here to speak with you.”

He did not immediately cut down Lawrence, nor did he put him in bonds. That meant he was much more open-minded than expected when dealing with an outsider who had come onto his land with the express purpose of overturning his plans.

But it did not take long for Lawrence to realize that Matthias was not so much tolerant as he was *tired*.

Lawrence glanced at Meyer and the smith before turning his attention to the soldiers and their awkward spears.

“Alone,” the lord added.

Matthias probably assumed that Lawrence would think he would be killed alone among the trees, but Lawrence was worried about something else entirely. His primary concern was that if things even looked like they might get violent, then Holo was liable to fly into a rage and turn everyone else into forest fertilizer.

“Word of you has suddenly spread like wildfire in these parts. I wish to hear what you have to say.”

He had likely heard of the lumber tariff negotiations in Salonia.

Lawrence nodded then glanced at Holo. She did not seem to sense anything out of the ordinary about this, so she only huffed in response.

Just in case, Lawrence checked where the dagger and its clasp was at his waist, then set forth to follow the lord, staying two paces behind him.

The road they took went the precise opposite direction of the one that led back to town—likely this was the one the smith used every day when he had business in the forest. It was not as though Lawrence could casually start a conversation with the distinguished person leading the way, so the two walked in total silence. As Lawrence idly watched how the dappled sunlight poured through the canopy of leaves and created deerlike spots on Lord Matthias’s fur coat, the landlord finally spoke up.

“Are you from Kerube?”

It was not an entirely unexpected question. Lawrence knew right away what Matthias was worried about.

All he had to do was think of the relationship between Kerube and Karlan that Meyer painted in his story and recall that Tonneburg was partnering with Karlan on a large-scale project.

If there was the possibility of secret agents from Kerube who had come to sink the plan he had crafted with Karlan, then Lawrence had to be especially

careful to avoid arousing Matthias's suspicions.

Matthias did not seem to be a fool, so Lawrence promptly came up with his answer.

"I have been to Kerube before, but in Salonia I simply worked at the behest of a priest."

"I also heard you threw away your opportunity to take up a lordship."

Lawrence cracked a little smile. "Forgive my arrogance, but I suppose there was a future in which we could have walked side by side as equals."

When Matthias turned around to look at him, there was a faint smile on his tired features, and he waved Lawrence up beside him.

"So what did Meyer say to convince you to come along? What sort of reward did he promise you?"

The way Matthias showed him that they were equals in the forest by dispensing with formalities showed that he was an affable ruler.

Lawrence, too, doubted he would be subject to some trick or ruse at this point, so he gave a relatively straightforward answer.

"He told me that your precious forest was at risk as a result of my actions. And he urged me to show you that the numbers of your plan do not quite add up using my skills as a merchant."

It was not a lie, but Matthias shot him a clearly dubious look, so he quickly added:

"As a reward, he promised honey and dried mushrooms and the like. There was a very persuasive case that they're important luxuries for running a bathhouse."

At last, Matthias finally understood how Meyer managed to rope Lawrence in.

"I see. Having something to protect can be a source of weakness at times." He ran a hand over his beard and sighed. "And my numbers, you say," he laughed dryly. "I suppose he got a good look at me lamenting over my lack of money."

Lawrence glanced up at Matthias just in time to see him feebly shrug.

“My father and grandfather fought hard in troubled times to protect the forest. I suppose you could say that is all they ever thought about.” He continued, giving Lawrence no time to react, “They could have sold lumber or cut down the forest to expand the fields and gotten all the money they needed. But they never did, and the only thing they accumulated was debt. They appeased their enemies with bribes, hired mercenaries to fend off those they could not buy off—they did whatever they could to survive.” Matthias puffed out his chest, taking a big lungful of the crisp, forest air. “All that has remained is this great big forest and a great big debt.”

Nothing in this world was free.

“The debt alone can be slowly repaid. Even if it isn’t paid off by my son’s time, it should be settled by my grandson’s time.”

Lawrence knew of plenty of lords who borrowed money and never intended to pay it back, so this alone convinced him Matthias was a man of character.

“But I am no expert in the matters of coin. I believe I am a man who can be easily swayed if I place myself in the hands of a skilled merchant. Am I wrong?”

Matthias at last turned to look at Lawrence, who gave an honest nod.

“No. Forgive me.”

A wry smile crossed Matthias’s face.

Though it was not a particularly peaceful method, Lawrence’s plan was to show that keeping the wolves away would take an unrealistic amount of money if they wanted to develop parts of the forest, and to show that it would have far-reaching consequences. Anyone would then see that only a foolish ruler would still insist on following the plan knowing all this.

“Of course, I would have pushed ahead with the plan, no matter what was suggested to me,” Matthias said. “But that would make me seem like a fool. And I do not want that. Do you understand?”

Matthias was not the sort to force his subjects into submission. The way he led was offering his people a good reason to follow him. Lawrence’s presence was causing them to quarrel even more. They reasonably wanted to avoid calling off the plan if possible.

That, however, naturally brought Lawrence to one response.

“Would you mind if I gave you my personal views on the matter?” Lawrence asked.

Matthias gave an awkward smile. “We walk shoulder to shoulder. Of course you may.”

“Then forgive me if this assumption is off base, but have your financial issues forced you to accept Karlan’s plan, no matter what the conditions?”

Lawrence was essentially telling him that it was foolish to allow someone else to hold the reins of his territory’s fate, but Matthias did not seem to be enraged by the implication—he only heaved a long, thin sigh.

“My grandfather and father—and myself, I suppose—have spent too much of our energy trying to protect the forest.” Matthias gazed distantly down the forest path, then turned to look at Lawrence. “The Church has long suspected us of heresy.”

“—Ah.” On Lawrence’s map of the situation, a new waterway opened up, changing the entire lay of the land. “I... I see.”

As his eyes scanned the perfectly good forest, one that had gained Holo’s approval, Lawrence hummed.

Matthias *needed* to be seen cutting the forest down.

He had to show the world that the forest was not holy or inviolable, and that his family was not worshipping the forest itself like heretics might have.

Tired, Matthias’s shoulders dropped.

“The situation surrounding the Church is constantly changing. Both the old guard and the Twilight Cardinal, who’s criticizing the old guard, are working desperately for the sake of their people. And any who do not belong to their specific camps are treated as enemies. Do you understand?”

I do, because the Twilight Cardinal is essentially my son.

For a brief moment, Lawrence pictured himself saying that out loud, then quickly swallowed his words.

“You mean to say that no matter which side you choose, your forest is still a problem.”

“Precisely. If I choose one, then the other will see me as the enemy. And no matter which one I choose, the woods themselves stink of heresy. It is deep and dense, after all.”

A forest like this was not unusual in Nyohhira. Venturing farther north would eventually lead to genuinely thick forests where the lifeblood of Holo’s kind still beat, where no human had ever set foot.

But this part of the world had been under human rule for a very, very long time. It was not unusual to stumble upon fields as far as the eye could see.

A deep, dark forest was much too exceptional.

“Our account books are filled to the brim with red numbers—beggars like me cannot be choosers.”

Lawrence nodded, rearranging the entire situation in his mind.

“Which means that cutting down the forest will not only allow you to make some money by selling lumber, but also show you are not worshipping toads and offering sacrifices to the springs in the deepest parts of your forests like heretics.”

Matthias cackled at the stereotypical depiction of pagans.

“You are correct. Karlan will be able to develop further if they’re able to build a road that cuts through our forest. They could also mediate on our behalf with the more powerful members of the Church—the city trades with distant lands on a near daily basis, you see. By allowing them to extract lumber from the forest and build a road through it, then it will both solve the heresy problem *and* the debt problem, both of which have plagued us for a long time. I cannot think of this as anything but a God-given opportunity for my sons to inherit a clean slate.”

And that was why Matthias did not heed Meyer or the mayor, no matter how much they warned him of the dangers. And Meyer, who had finally lost his patience, brought along a merchant who might give them an infallible reason Matthias would have to acknowledge, so Matthias himself decided to lay bare

all his innermost thoughts.

Wait a minute, Lawrence thought. *Matthias can't possibly be that simple of a ruler.*

"You must have a very special reason to tell me all this."

Matthias was exposing his family's humiliation to him—a total and complete stranger.

There was no doubt that Matthias had come up with countless options for himself. As they walked through the forest, he turned to Lawrence and said, "I learned of your deeds in Salonia when word reached Karlan. A larger allotment of lumber coming from Salonia naturally means less wood taken from my forest. So you can imagine how worried I was."

"I...apologize."

"Ha-ha. Still, when I heard of what you did in Salonia, what intrigued me the most wasn't actually the lumber."

"It wasn't?" Lawrence asked, hesitant.

"I grew doubtful if I should trust in Karlan's ability to conduct business to begin with."

Lawrence wordlessly turned to look at Matthias—there was something questionable about that.

"The lumber tariff negotiations in Salonia were actually a part of the plan from Karlan. And that made me reconsider what the true extent of their power was. If a random merchant could show up and foil them so easily, then I wondered if the rest of the plan would come to fruition at all."

Lawrence understood the apprehension, but it was then that he realized there was something he needed to confirm. It was something that had sat in the corner of his mind ever since he met Meyer.

"Do you mind if I ask you something? Why does Karlan want lumber this badly?"

Matthias dipped his head before answering. "While an offering of lumber would demonstrate that I am not a heretic, Karlan's true hope is to gain the

Church's goodwill in exchange for the lumber, which *everyone* is hurting for right now."

Unlike Tonneburg, Karlan was not under suspicion of heathenry—so why were they just as eager to deal with the Church? Only those who did not understand commerce would ask a question like that. There was no greater trade partner in the world, after all.

"It's not as if I have no love for this forest. The Tonneburg family has done what it can to protect it for generations. And as my people have probably explained already, these woods play an important part in supporting the wheat fields of this region. I understand its value better than anyone. But our account books are full of red numbers, we are suspected of heresy, and the continued existence of my dominion itself is in now in question."

Left with no other choice, Matthias had taken on a bet knowing full well the risks.

But now he had started to doubt the capabilities of the plan's masterminds.

There was no way he was telling Lawrence every detail of this story just because he wanted to vent.

Matthias, as though waiting for Lawrence to arrive at that conclusion, suddenly looked at him with the expressionless face of a leader.

"I want you to fight on my side. Act as my proxy and carefully investigate this plan of Karlan's. Try and see if they've taken on a disadvantageous deal with the Church, or..." He lowered his voice, though no one else was in the woods with them. "I hate to dwell on it, but it's possible they're trying to dupe me."

That was likely the one thing he had been wanting to ask Lawrence the most.

Matthias had ignored the villagers' efforts and pleas to stop and pushed ahead with the plan with Karlan. Even if he had started having doubts about Karlan's plan, he had no one to help him change course.

There was a powerlessness about Matthias that was obvious—Lawrence knew that even if he refused, he would not be cut down by the sword hanging at the lord's waist.

Matthias was a good leader.

And *because* he was a good leader, he was bound by a great many things.

At this point, Lawrence felt it unlikely that he would be able to help with Meyer's request of keeping the forest intact. That was not because Matthias had found out about his secret maneuvers, but because Matthias had little option.

Since Matthias's territory was under suspicion of heresy or paganism, they were at risk of being consumed by the growing rift in the Church and being ground to dust in the ensuing power struggle if they did nothing. And due to the lord's ongoing debts, it was likely that his territory would be shattered into tiny pieces by those who hungered for coin.

"If I may confirm something with you," Lawrence spoke up. "Are the debts owed to Karlan?"

If they were, then that would make Matthias's position all the more difficult. It would be even more likely that the city was taking advantage of that leverage and dragging him into a dishonest plan.

"No. It's the greedy merchants from Kerube."

There was good reason for his strong tone—the unpleasant interactions involving debt they had been shouldering since his grandfather's time.

It seemed Matthias decided to work with Karlan because he, too, had a bone to pick with Kerube.

Lawrence was starting to see the pieces on the board.

If there was anything he could do for the sake of the forest, it was side with Matthias.

"I have a request as well," he said.

"Money?" Matthias asked.

The expression on his face told him that Matthias wondered if this merchant was also just after coin in the end; Lawrence only shrugged in response, disrespectful as it was.

“Promise me you’ll let Meyer off the hook. He’ll be invaluable in ensuring the forest continues to exist.”

Matthias stared blankly for a moment before donning a troubled smile. “Why would I ever punish him to begin with? I hadn’t even considered it.” He gave a coarse cough of a laugh, as though telling Lawrence it was an absurd idea. “Meyer loves the forest more than anyone. Even me. All he ever thinks about are the trees. That’s why I’ll need him by my side when the people from Karlan come to build their road. Those sea dwellers will have no idea what sort of foolish mistakes they’ll be making.”

Perhaps Meyer had spared no effort to protect the Tonneburg Woods, the ones Matthias’s family had worked hard to preserve over generations, precisely because he knew Matthias trusted him so.

“I need to reward Meyer for bringing you here.”

“.....”

Lawrence looked at Matthias.

The conflict was evident on his face.

“Back to the matter at hand. I believe you just mentioned the possibility of Karlan trying to dupe you. Have there been any signs of that?”

“...No. My doubts are not that strong, nor do I *wish* to doubt them so. I just believe it’s more likely that the Church is unfairly taking advantage of them, rather than the city actively exploiting my weakness.”

The reasoning behind that hunch came from hearing rumors about a passing merchant who happened to foil their plans in Salonia. Which meant that even if they were able to intercede on Matthias’s behalf with the Church, it was questionable as to whether they would be able to hold proper negotiations.

“Do you think they’ll be selling off the forest for cheap, then?”

Reluctantly, Matthias nodded. The fate of his land hinged on the outcome of this deal, yet he had no choice but to leave it in the hands of others. Lawrence could tell by that gesture alone that he was beset by helplessness.

As he took notes in his mental account book, Lawrence realized a necessary

column had been left blank.

“One more question.”

“Go on, then. You already know about our most humiliating circumstances; you may as well ask about everything else.”

Lawrence had a feeling that if Matthias were one of the guests at his bathhouse, he would have been a lovely patron to have.

“Which faction of the Church do you personally side with?”

Matthias’s eyes fell shut at the question; Lawrence realized belatedly, as the question left his mouth, that this was not a question to be asked lightly. Because if Matthias was on the side of the Church’s old guard, that meant he would be working with Col’s enemies.

And along that same logic, it was a sharp fork in the road that might show Matthias which side Lawrence belonged to.

But Matthias was no fool; he had the courage to follow the necessary path with no hesitation, even in the darkness.

“I sympathize with the Twilight Cardinal.” His straightened back sagged from a lack of confidence. “I am not sure how you feel, however...”

“It’s all right,” Lawrence gave a genuine smile—not a merchant’s one. “I’m relieved.”

Matthias blinked, then smiled. He had perhaps assumed that a cruel and greedy merchant would take the side of the more compatible Church conservatives.

“That does make me wonder, however,” Lawrence began.

“About what?”

“If the Twilight Cardinal is really asking for lumber in exchange for his support. Especially in your case, Lord Matthias—your problem directly relates to faith.”

Col, at least, would not do such a thing—he would come see Matthias for himself to ascertain whether or not the lord could be trusted, then put a neat little bow on their talks with one handshake. Col had left Nyohhira with the

intent of examining the culture of the Church, investigating where they wielded their power to chase excessive profits and enact reform.

That naturally made Lawrence suspect that Karlan was exploiting Tonneburg's weakness to profit off the lumber.

But the lord was knowledgeable—he spoke up first.

“Whatever they claim their ideals to be...things are not always so cut-and-dry in the real world.”

It was not as though Col could personally keep an eye on every little happening, so it was entirely possible that Karlan's representative had simply treated the petition to a religious authority like they would have in the olden days.

“And it is not simply because I've started having doubts over Karlan's negotiating power that I suspect the Twilight Cardinal's camp might be forcing the city's hand.”

“And that means?”

“Not long ago, things were mostly settled between Karlan and the Twilight Cardinal's camp—all that was left was my payment. I went to the city to have a look over the contract drafted by a clerk in Karlan. And that is the first time I came face-to-face with someone who represented the Twilight Cardinal in all this.”

Upon realizing that he did not meet Col directly, Lawrence realized it was not Col who asked for the lumber; while that gave him some relief, an uneasy feeling settled in his stomach at the same time.

This was likely the first big deal the officials of Karlan had ever mediated, and that came with many firsts. There was no doubt they were bumbling along, playing things by ear as the deal progressed.

And at last, someone directly associated with the Twilight Cardinal appeared before the worried lord.

If that person only made his worries worse instead of easing them, then it was quite clear what kind of impression they would have made on Matthias.

“Do you think the merchants in Karlan are being duped by someone using the Twilight Cardinal’s name?”

“.....”

Matthias gave no answer, but that meant his doubt was too strong for him to say no outright.

It was hard to tell whether or not he believed it was a shame to start doubting someone he had trusted once; he opened his mouth, as though reorganizing his thoughts.

“The one negotiating with Karlan is, without a doubt, an associate of the Twilight Cardinal—or so they tell me. My priest accompanied me to the meeting because he said his acquaintance was present.”

The priest he mentioned was the one who accompanied Matthias, who hosted Lawrence and Holo the night before, and then promptly informed Matthias of their arrival.

“But when we arrived at the meeting, I had no choice but to doubt the contract. Perhaps it’s what you might call the forest dweller’s instinct. It was a bit of a vain struggle, but I told them I would like to take the contract home and confer with my vassals one last time. But there is little we can do at this point. There were countless times I thought about calling it all off. So perhaps in a way, it was part of my own will that Meyer went around looking for people who could help us.”

Matthias’s fears were all too apparent.

“And he found you.”

He had grasped at straws until a ray of hope appeared at the final hour.

But Lawrence still could not understand why Matthias doubted the Twilight Cardinal’s representative so intensely. All of Karlan was in on the plan, so they should have gotten all of the facts about this person straight. The Kingdom of Winfiel was not a distant country—it was just across the strait; so close it almost seemed like anyone could reach it with a quick swim. And the old priest himself had confirmed an acquaintance of his was there, too. Then where did the seed of doubt come in?

Just as that question crossed his mind, Matthias spoke.

“A wolf.”

“Excuse me?”

Lawrence’s eyes widened as he scanned the trees. He thought for a moment Holo had lost her patience.

“She’s a wolf.” Matthias’s eyes were wide and blank, as though he was reliving a nightmare. “The merchant from the Kingdom of Winfiel came to handle the negotiations on behalf of the Twilight Cardinal. She displayed her wealth by wearing the gaudiest clothes I’ve ever seen in my life—she was like the colorful birds of legend from the south. But I knew on the inside that she was a wolf, that she was evil, and that I could not let my guard down around her, a monster that lurked in the shadows of the deepest—”

“Lord Matthias, please, calm down.”

When Lawrence spoke, Matthias scanned the forest in fear.

“This person has been confirmed to be a legitimate representative of the Twilight Cardinal, right? What was her name?”

If this were a renowned merchant, then it would not be difficult for Lawrence to use his connections to find out who it was. All he really had to do was ask Col himself.

“The wolf, yes...”

A gust of wind blew past them; Lawrence almost thought he heard the sound of animal feet hitting the earth as it did.

“She called herself Eve Bolan.”

“...”

The lord made his home in the deep forest, which was why his instinct was spot-on.

Lawrence ground his teeth. Whether it was in an awkward smile or out of frustration was hard to tell.

Of course Matthias had every right to doubt her.

CHAPTER THREE



CHAPTER THREE

Lawrence and company went back the way Meyer brought them, and when they arrived at the checkpoint in which Holo had suffered her hangover, they stayed the night before going downriver.

Boats were stopped on the river as always, but it seemed as though they were pausing to take a break before heading into town to sell all their merchandise, so it was not hard to find a ship that would take them the rest of the way.

Meanwhile, the merchant that had lent them his cart was still at the inn, and he seemed generally displeased when Lawrence asked to nullify the agreement, but when Meyer offered him a cask of the forest's best honey, he graciously accepted.

"Sir Lawrence," Meyer said at last when their boat began to take them downriver; he had been rather silent this entire time. "I am not exactly sure what to say..."

"It's all right," Lawrence purposefully flashed a complacent smile. "Lord Matthias has promised a reward."

That reward was nothing more than forgiveness for now, but Meyer didn't know that; the news was enough to offer him some much-needed emotional support.

"And after listening to what Lord Matthias had to say, I've learned of another reason that I must get involved."

"Is...that so?" Meyer asked.

Lawrence shrugged. "I hear a hunter will always be particularly conscious of one or two creatures in the woods."

Meyer nodded slowly and sighed. "Thank you. We need you, for our forest's sake."

Lawrence took Meyer's hand and shook it; and at the boat captain's prompting, they took a seat.

Holo, who had been silent the entire time Lawrence spoke with Meyer, did not settle in Lawrence's lap; instead, she put a considerable distance between herself and him as she took her seat. She acted like a traveling nun, one who decided to accompany him simply because their destinations happened to be the same. Ever since he had summarized his conversation with Matthias to her, she had been acting like that, silent.

But it was clear why—she had determined that Eve was using Col's name to make a quick and tidy profit. And from what Matthias told them, Eve was wearing terribly gaudy clothes, spending appalling sums on song and dance, emphasizing her ostentatious wealth to Matthias.

Eve of course wore imposing clothes that suited the great merchant she was at their wedding, but that, too, felt more like a foil to Holo's lackadaisical attitude. At her core, she always prided herself on being a stern wolf, but it never seemed like she ever wanted to give in to the luxuries of the material world.

And so when Matthias told Lawrence of how Eve seemed to have given into her greed, Lawrence felt, somehow, like he had been betrayed.

And what troubled Lawrence even more was Eve's position. All he had to do was think back on the letters they received, jointly written by Col and Myuri—Holo always told him that they carried with them the scent of joy of travel. Then, at some point, the letters said, they reunited with Eve, and she turned out to be a reliable ally ever since.

Col was straightforward in his personality, and Eve always had a soft spot for him. And Eve gave off a certain scent of danger that differed from the crafty wisewolf that intrigued Myuri—it was clear from her writing that she had taken to the woman. Perhaps Eve was using her deep relationship with the two to collect fees from would-be petitioners and then was splurging with her extraordinary profits.

Col set off on his journey because he believed that justice was a worthy pursuit. And Matthias, who stood on the brink of the fate of his forest, was

clearly not a bad ruler.

The jewels decorating Eve's vestments glittered with the fires that were going to burn the forest that Matthias's family had spent generations trying to protect.

It was one of the world's greatest absurdities, and perhaps Eve's treachery was the same.

But at the very least, Lawrence now understood whose side he needed to be on.

"Dear," Holo called to Lawrence once, long after the boat set sail from the checkpoint, but she said no more. She did not doze, nor did she snack; she simply stared blankly at the passing fields. Perhaps she was having trouble expressing what she felt.

Lawrence offered a reassuring nod and a smile in return.

Relief passed over her features for a brief moment, but she quickly hardened her expression and trained her gaze on the distance.

Throughout their wedding, Lawrence had caught glimpses of Holo and Eve deep in conversation.

When that thought crossed his mind, he could feel himself gritting his teeth even harder.

He was perfectly used to watching treachery unfold in the world of commerce, but that was not what this was to Holo. His wife was the sort to keep ancient promises, even long after the hearts of the people had long moved past them. That was what had kept her watching over the wheat in Pasloe for centuries.

Though Lawrence would never match Holo in some things, the human world was his field of expertise.

Over and over Lawrence turned over the conversation he had with Matthias in his head as he kept his gaze fixed straight ahead toward the port town of Karlan.

As evening loomed, the boat passed through the Karlan city gates and arrived

at the river port. The seaport was situated in a spot a short distance away from the city, out of a desire to put some distance between them and the accumulation of mud and silt from the river. And so only smaller river-faring boats were docked here.

The rumors alone that tariffs might fall had the tax-collecting soldiers carrying out their job in a perfunctory manner, and the town was filled with a cheery air.

Though they had most certainly not found themselves at an enormous port city, all of the buildings facing the river were grand in all four of their stories, and farther down the river they could see a church bell tower, one that also acted as a lighthouse.

Beyond that lay an azure sea, where the dark of night was steadily seeping in and changing its colors toward the horizon; only a faint flare of the sunset remained on the line between sky and sea. The sky was cloudless. One could stand upon the cliffs, squint, and faintly see the lights of Winfiel on the other side.

“Let’s go get our room at the inn that Meyer told us about and then go check out the taverns. How about it?”

Lawrence stepped onto the dock first and held out his hand for Holo to take. She staggered a bit, the sea still in her legs, and then gave a bit of a mumbled reply. Lawrence said no more after that, either, and made his way to the inn following the directions he had been given.

The inn that served as their destination was empty enough that Lawrence did not even need to give Meyer’s name. Every place in town was normally crowded at this time of year, considering all sorts of products were being sold off in the pre-winter rush, including freshly harvested wheat, so it was clear that talks about tariffs were having a considerable effect. The innkeeper was obviously troubled by the approaching winter—his inn should be busy.

As Lawrence listened to the innkeeper complain about his hopes that the tariff talks would end soon, he recalled all of the things Matthias told him. The seasons changed even in lands across the sea, so the Twilight Cardinal, and by extension, Eve, wanted to wrap up this deal with Karlan before winter came.

Under normal circumstances, he would consider this regular trade sense, but

he could not shake the impression that this was their way of wanting to put a bow on the transaction before their schemes were revealed.

That Eve herself had personally come to the relatively unknown port town of Karlan strengthened his doubts that she was causing problems in places Col was unaware of.

According to what Matthias heard in their meeting, Eve was staying in Karlan, whose access to the sea was just as convenient, instead of Kerube due to a long-standing grudge, even though she had business in the mainland regarding the incident with the Church.

Lawrence, of course, was wholly aware of this grudge. There had been a historic kerfuffle surrounding the legendary sea creature, the narwhal. And though he logically did not want to deny the possibility, this was still Eve.

When his interests conflicted with hers, he could trust nothing but her attachment to profit.

“People sure do change, huh?” Lawrence remarked as they walked around Karlan under the darkening sky. “I hear she holds huge banquets at the tavern every night.”

Holo could keep up with anyone when it came to drinks, but Eve could rent out an entire establishment for her parties, which meant a *lot* of drinks. All the bards and dancers would gather in one place, and the best chefs in town would come to the tavern for work.

Eve, who had once chased profit and profit alone like an icicle honed by a blade, had been a bad person once upon a time, yes. But she was, at the same time, the ideal merchant in Lawrence’s mind.

Which meant the swirl of emotions in his chest likely stemmed from disappointment.

They had even come to blows once at the Lenos inn, which had acted as her storehouse, over an allotment of furs and smuggling of rock salts.

What had she said back then?

Lawrence had asked her what exactly it was that inspired her passion to

pursue coin so single-mindedly—how had she responded?

It seemed the ultimate end of her road had been a disappointing one.

“I think the tavern the innkeeper mentioned was around here...”

They came to a crossroads of two major flagstone streets and Lawrence’s gaze wandered.

Holo tugged at his sleeve. “I hear music.”

She was not interested in the grilled meats being served at the open-air stalls; her hood was pulled so low over her eyes, he could not see her expression.

Lawrence pictured what might be going on in her mind, swallowed, then headed in the direction she pointed.

There, they found the tavern, patrons overflowing into the street; sounds of music and clapping came from the inside. The smoke of cooking fires stung their eyes, and there came the distinct smell of meat and fish fat and expensive spices.

Lawrence’s stomach grumbled in response to the onslaught of aromas; he steeled his stomach before walking in.

They dodged the ring of dancing men outside the tavern, slipped past the drunkards blocking the entrance, and were shocked by the sight of the sheer amount of people forming a circle before them. In the center of the circle, bards played music, and there were girls singing at the top of their lungs. But the patrons within the tavern did not even spare them a glance.

On the tables stacked in the very center of the establishment majestically danced a girl in red. It almost seemed as though she wore flames over her body.

Her outfit was so flashy that a priest would surely faint at the sight; but what drew the eye more was the large red umbrella she held. It was decorated with golden thread, which meant it was likely a special item from the desert countries far to the south of here. In contrast to the intense passion the strange umbrella dance gave, the girl’s face was cool and calm—almost delighted. Nyohhira, too, offered patrons the chance to watch dances while partaking in drink, but this differed from any performance Lawrence had ever seen in the

bathhouse.

Either way, a beautiful girl performing an elegant dance was not reason enough for the tavern to be overflowing with people. There were dishes Lawrence had never seen before lining the tables here and there, and the patrons were plenty drunk, regardless.

At a glance, Lawrence could tell that most of the patrons enjoying themselves indoors were well-off—many looked to be merchants, clerks, or mercenary captains by the looks of it. One needed a certain amount of money to participate in festivities like these.

Lawrence pushed forward, careful not to lose Holo in the crowd as he headed for the far end of the tavern. He had caught glimpses of a corner in the back where things seemed to be different. Sharp-eyed guards stood, protecting particularly well-dressed patrons.

If Matthias was right, then the exotic girl dancing with the red umbrella was a member of Eve's entourage.

Lawrence had no way of telling how rich she was now, what sort of status she held now.

And so he racked his brains, but ultimately was not sure how he should approach her.

Regardless, he knew he would speak whatever first came to mind when he saw her.

There were so many emotions swirling in the pit of his throat, after all.

Matthias's and Meyer's beloved forest, the one they were on the brink of losing, was of an entirely different world here in this tavern.

Lawrence had so much he wanted to say to the great merchant seated at the highest-status seat.

"Hey."

The guards were good; they immediately noticed where Lawrence was headed and came to stand in his way.

"Bathroom's that way."

“No, I’m going the right way.”

Beyond the guards, Lawrence spotted who he was looking for.

She smiled elegantly, drinking from a delicate-looking glass cup, one that seemed like it would shatter at the slightest touch.

Though she nodded with great interest, perhaps listening to the cooks describe what sort of meal she was having, she made no move to touch the food. She ultimately passed the plate to a plump merchant sitting nearby, showing just how magnanimous she was, as though demonstrating that a leader’s job was to share with others.

But that price would be paid by the lumber from the great trees of the Tonneburg Woods. Was this party worth destroying the homes of the squirrels that ran across the branches, the mice that hid within the hollows of trees, the rabbits that burrowed in the ground? Those that fed the livestock in the forest, who fertilized the fields, whose fingernails were caked in dirt from their hard labor every day, were unlikely to ever step foot in a place like this in their entire lives.

It was hard to believe that this dizzying crowd and the stillness of the woods belonged in the same world.

Lawrence pushed past the guard with his chest, pressing forward, heeding no commands to stop. Hands grasped at his shoulder, and just as he tried to shrug them off, another guard held him back.

It was so loud in the tavern he could scarcely hear the person next to him; nearby patrons did not even look at him. The special guests, of course, stared in disbelief at the trespasser. One of them, the queen of the tavern, with her glass cup in hand, stared and blinked, as though wondering if she was seeing correctly.

It was Lawrence’s will alone that kept him rooted in place as three guards tried to pry him away from the table, when Eve finally spoke up.

“He’s an acquaintance.”

Lawrence could feel through the grip on him that the guards were momentarily bewildered. And after a beat, they let go. From the nimble way

they moved, it was clear they were simply not strongmen interested in gold—they were people who had spent many years with her.

Lawrence straightened his clothes and checked to make sure Holo was okay—she stood a short distance away, quietly with her coat draped over her, like a girl who had wandered into the tavern purely by accident. Lawrence, ignoring the town authorities who stared at the scene in amazement, stared straight at Eve.

“I need to speak with you.”

Those staring at Lawrence turned their attention to Eve.

Eve scrunched up her nose slightly, then gently placed her glass down with a quiet huff. At the same time, the music and singing swelled, the instruments struck a powerful chord, and then it all came to an end.

Ear-splitting applause tore through the tavern, and the dancer in red gracefully smiled at the crowd.

Eve spared her one glance before deigning to stand up.

“It’ll be quieter out back.”

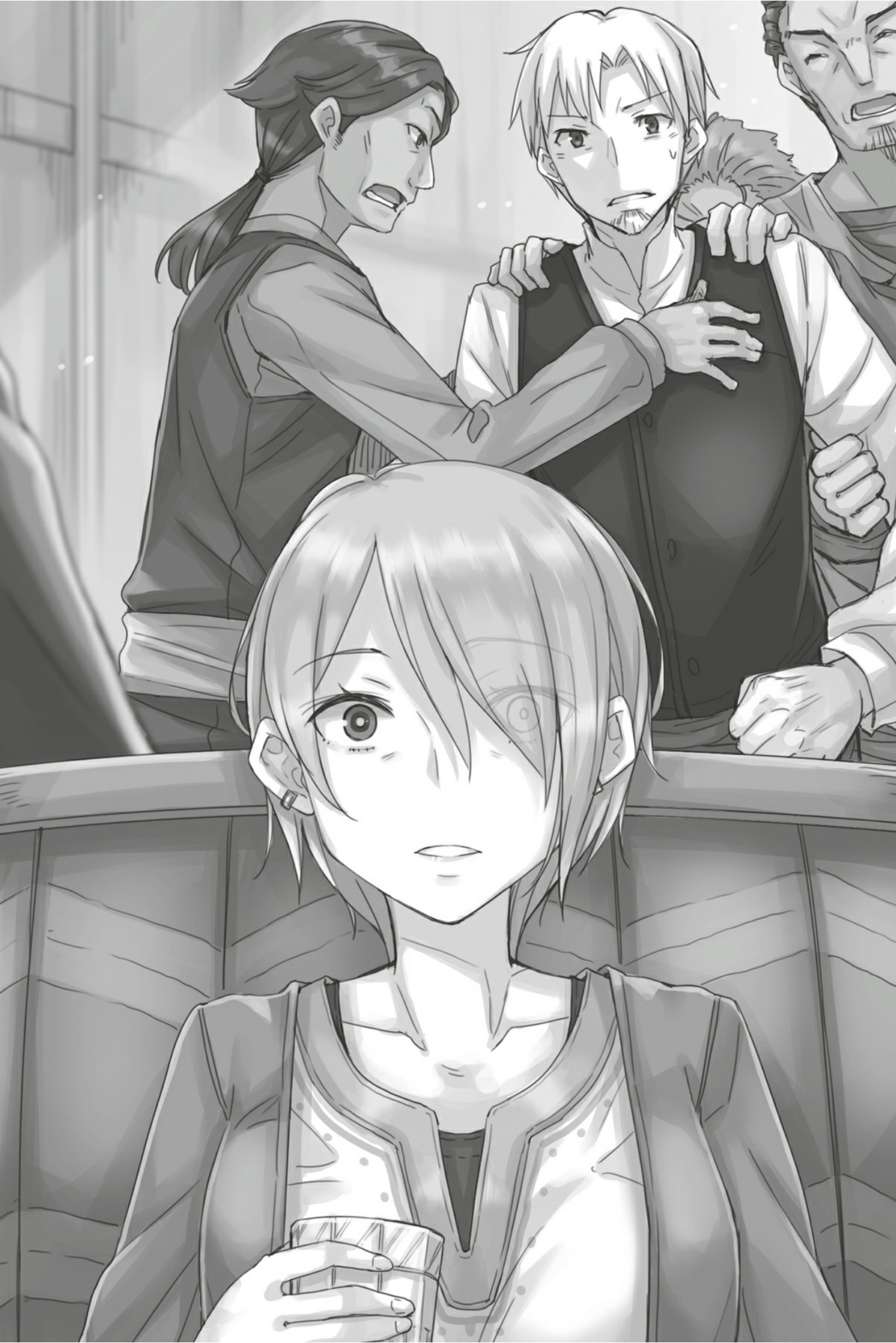
She told the other patrons to keep enjoying themselves before walking off, one guard in tow.

Lawrence followed after, and a moment later, so did Holo.

Though applause still filled the tavern, a new song began and the hall filled with even more life.

One stray dog scampered away with its tail between its legs.

The back of the building was a space shared by several other buildings, home to several empty barrels of ale and stacks of assorted cargo from the neighboring trading houses—there was no one else around.



“What happened to your bathhouse in Nyohhira? Peak season isn’t too far off.”

Eve also wore a long, billowing outfit, one reminiscent of the clothes the desert dwellers wore, though it was not as elaborate as the dancer’s. It was either silk or wool felt—either way, it was a luxury fabric Lawrence was not familiar with. When Eve moved to sit down on one of the barrels, her guard lay a cloth over it.

“I heard tell from the deep forest that there is a wolf here.”

Eve, upon her barrel, glanced away, faint smile still on her face. After thinking for a moment, she smirked, and sighed.

“Did Lord Tonneburg hire you? To save his forest?”

For just a brief moment, Eve’s eyes flickered toward Holo. Eve knew what Holo really was, of course, so she had assumed they had plenty of motivation.

“No, hold on,” she said and folded over, placing her hand to her mouth in thought as she stared at Lawrence. “Don’t tell me *you* were the merchant that caused all that fuss in Salonia?”

If the lumber issue in Salonia was a part of Karlan’s plan, then it had of course reached Eve’s ears.

“Was that part of your grand plan?” Lawrence asked.

When he first met Eve back when he was but a peddler, she had concocted a grandiose scheme of her own both in Lenos and in Kerube in pursuit of gold. Even though it meant putting herself in danger.

Matthias was right to wonder if the Karlan negotiators were getting swept up in Eve’s plot.

And by what Lawrence saw from the party in the tavern, he felt that was the right way to look at this.

“It certainly seems you think that way.” Eve gave a very fitting look and smile. “I’m starting to get the picture now.”

There were no lights back here, and only a waning moon hung above them, so

Eve's smile, shrouded in the dark, sent Lawrence's memories back into the past.

But time marched on, and things were different now.

He wanted to show that, but Eve's troubled tone interrupted his thoughts.

"And why is the little lady being so quiet?"

"She's—"

—not a part of this.

The moment he began to say that, Holo spoke up instead.

"Once this fool starts, he never listens to what I say."

"I—what?"

Lawrence whirled around in surprise to see Holo there.

She did not seem angry, sad, pained, or even disappointed—she had only drawn her thin shoulders up in annoyance.

"He thinks you a villain who is hoarding coin in little Col's name and spending it all on debauchery."

"Heh," Eve barked, unable to keep her mirth from showing, even with the fist in front of her mouth.

Lawrence was perplexed, unsure of what any of this meant, when Holo approached him and clapped him on his lower back.

"You assume too much. Though it is a great help when we are headed in the correct direction."

That was all she needed to say to send Lawrence's thoughts racing like the rapids through every moment from his conversation with Matthias in the forest until now.

Holo had been hurt and quiet because Eve was betraying Col and Myuri for coin—that was, at least, how the world looked from his eyes.

"Tis about her debauchery, naturally," Holo carelessly jerked her chin toward Eve. "'Twas a secret between me and her. I cannot blame you for making false assumptions."

Eve shrugged. “Just keep a tight rein on it, okay? I don’t want this to come to blows at this age.”

Lawrence, looking between Holo and Eve in their obvious mutual understanding, eventually said in desperation, “I think you’d be getting all the hits in at this point...”

It was Holo who then joined in on the pummeling.

Lawrence was no match for the two women—the two wolves.

“You were pretty angry. That stubborn lord must not have had good things to say about me, huh? Do you know how hard I worked to treat him well?” Eve said, then muttered, “Hoarding?” She gave another bark of laughter.

“That is your job, no? You did not look the slightest bit hungry, even with all that delicious food around you.”

Holo jerked her head back toward the tavern.

“Yeah. Guess it’s because I can eat all that stuff every night. The people here said they wanted to learn how to cook popular dishes from the south, so I’ve been taste-testing them.”

Holo’s tail, swishing beneath her cloak, was like that of a dog waiting to be given scraps at the table. *What happened to being a wolf?* Lawrence thought, the spiteful remark his way of easing his frustration of being left out of the conversation.

“That goes for the song and dance, too. The dancers wanted to adopt what dances are popular in the south from my dancers, and bard troupes from all over the region have come for the same reason. And that’s why every day is like this.”

From Lawrence’s perspective, it only seemed as though she was holding banquets and generously treating everyone to fancy feasts at the tavern. But now that she mentioned it, all Eve herself had been doing was sipping her drink and speaking with the chefs—that in particular seemed strange. Even to have an entire group of minstrels gathered in one place would surely cause the other establishments to complain; the guilds would not stay silent about that.

Matthias had said that Eve was showing off her wealth in their meeting, but Eve said she had done her best to treat him respectfully. They did not quite see eye to eye, which meant it was not all that strange to hear that Matthias saw her as villainous. He was just like Lawrence, ranting and raving about how Eve had reduced herself to a simple greedy merchant.

But if that had all been a mistake, then there was one thing Lawrence did not understand.

“What are you doing in this town, then?” he asked.

Eve replied, “I should be asking you the same thing.”

A person important enough could simply ask for a seat in a crowded tavern, and one would magically appear. When Eve told them that the reasons she was in Karlan were complicated and suggested they save it until after the banquet, Holo agreed without waiting for Lawrence’s response first.

And so as Holo, who was in a much better mood than she had been not too long ago, was about to sit in her seat, the proprietor came over to them to take their order and she yelled with glee, “Your best meat and drink!”

The reason Lawrence remained glum, of course, was not because he knew the funds would be going to Eve.

After watching Holo gulp down the fancy, clear wine, he looked down at his own tired expression in the reflection of the wine in his mug.

“Seriously, what on earth is going on?”

It came out more reproachful than he intended because he earnestly wished Holo would have said something earlier if she realized he had gotten the wrong idea.

“*Glug... Glug... Ahhh!* Sweet mead and filling ale are nice drinks, but wine is simply the best!”

They were soon brought a plate filled with freshly roasted pork, fat dripping from the carvings onto the plate—there must have been a roast going on in the kitchen at all times. What was interesting was that it came with mustard and all sorts of spices, allowing Holo to season the meat as she liked.

Lawrence stared hard at the spices, knowing that bringing some of them to an apothecary would fetch him quite the handsome penny.

“This is quite a stylish way of eating, unlike pork slathered in garlic sauce. And this... Ah! This will be quite useful in times like these.”

In her hand, she held a metal spoon, the eating end of it split into three points. They had in their kitchen something of a similar shape, but as big as a spear; it was used for spit-roasted pig and putting large chunks of beef into stew pots. A very clever someone realized it would be convenient to shrink it down to use at the dining table.

And Holo did indeed manage to lift a piece of pork, coat it in spice, and bring it to her mouth, all without dirtying her hands. Most of those who ate like this were the dainty diners from the south, and this utensil had been likely introduced at Eve’s suggestion.

Lawrence made a general mental note to adopt the practice into the bathhouse, too.

“Well?” Lawrence asked again, and Holo, who was too enraptured by the delicious plate of food before her, gave a bothersome shrug.

“Not much at all is going on. I’ve known for quite a while that she has wanted to let loose. We invited her to Nyohhira when you took me in with your slick talk, no? It was then that we spoke.”

During the long reception that followed the wedding, Lawrence most certainly recalled seeing Holo and Eve speaking rather intimately with each other.

But he never learned of what they spoke, and he never would, since it did not seem like it was something he could ask about.

As Lawrence waited for her to continue, she paused, mug of wine still in her hand.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, and she jumped in her seat. He saw her wolf ears prick beneath her hood.

“...’Tis nothing. The memory simply brings me back to the time,” she said and took a swig of her wine. When she spoke again, it was as though she was trying

to forget something. “She asked me what it felt like to create a weakness for myself.”

It was Lawrence’s turn to freeze.

“Weakness?”

Holo shrugged again, took another swig of wine, took a bite of her pork, took a bite of yet another dish that had arrived—fish slathered in some sort of sauce—and answered, “She is much more of a coward than I am. She had grown rather bored of hoarding gold and traveling alone, yet she had been unable to take the next step.”

That caught Lawrence off guard. Holo gave a half-hearted grin as a hint of pride crossed her features.

“I have you. She has no one. ’Tis a big difference.”

“ ... ”

Holo and Eve certainly seemed like entirely different people, but they did have similar qualities.

A pessimistic quality, one where neither could fully believe in the future.

“I decided to believe in a foolish promise a fool like you presented to me. That foolish promise of an interesting life, of always refilling my cup the moment it went empty.”

She finished drinking her first glass just as she finished speaking, so Lawrence dutifully ordered a new glass for her like a good servant.

“And?”

“That is all. When she saw us and our bathhouse, she at last realized ’twas a stupid thing to continue being the wounded wolf. Her wounds would not heal by hiding in the hollow of a tree, by always growling at her enemy. That is not the sort of hurt she has. But I suppose I cannot speak, considering how I lamented so long by myself in that wheat field...”

Eve was the daughter of former nobility from the Kingdom of Winfiel, but Lawrence had heard she had followed her predetermined fate after her family fell from grace. An affluent merchant purchased the entire family with the

intent of making the reputation of their highborn family his own, and after the merchant that became her husband went bankrupt and she lost her means to live, she eventually molded herself into the merchant she was today.

When Lawrence had unveiled her plot in Lenos, and they had drawn their blades to face each other as they kept stealing each other's profits, Lawrence asked her: *"Why do you keep exposing yourself to so much danger? What do you plan to do with all the money you keep hoarding?"*

Eve had been ready to plunge her knife into Lawrence in that moment, yet her response came with an embarrassed tone.

"Because you expected that of me."

After stockpiling an almost pointless amount of money, she could look back on all those who came and went in her life and gloat about what she had accomplished.

Lawrence realized Holo was smiling.

"Just as she said she would, she has found joy in the world, and has at last found herself a pack she can trust."

Lawrence's eyes drifted to Eve's table. Those who stood guard around her wore clothes reminiscent of those who dwelled in the desert, just like Eve's own attire. The girl dancing joyously with her umbrella in the middle of the tavern, too, wore similar clothes.

"Heh. Can you believe how cute she was? She insisted on having the support of a pioneer before taking her first steps."

Though Holo had lived for centuries, and at one point had even been regarded as a god, she was still plenty childlike. It was also said that one returned to childhood as one grew older, however, so perhaps it made perfect sense, but the wisewolf was delighted that Eve looked to her for support.

And as Lawrence watched Holo, he finally understood why he and Holo had vastly different reactions to the exact same information from Matthias.

"But you should have told me," he repeated, his tone somewhat accusatory.

Holo looked at him like a foolish sheep. "You fool. One does not go around

spilling secrets. And I know that no matter what I told you, you would not have believed me without seeing her for yourself.”

“Come on, I wouldn’t...,” he began, but he realized she might be right. Holo was kind-hearted, and he absolutely knew he *would* point out to her that she was incapable of holding negative opinions of Eve, who had come to their wedding.

“And I cannot say with absolute certainty she is not concocting some sort of evil scheme, of course. But I am quite sure that she is not,” she said, chuckling.

“Really?” he asked.

Holo shrugged. “Did you see how delighted she was to see us when she found us?”

It had only seemed like a look of surprise in Lawrence’s eyes, and the tavern was not all that well lit at night. Holo had poor eyesight, so he doubted she had been more keenly aware of the subtleties in her expression.

If anything, it had to have been the scent she gave off. That was because all the letters Col and Myuri sent to the bathhouse in Nyohhira were always so thickly covered in the scent of joy.

But after hearing that, Lawrence could not help the smile that crossed his face when he pictured Eve’s expression blossoming like a flower as she stood.

“Fine, fine. I get it now, but then what’s all this about?”

The truth remained that the Tonneburg Woods were in danger.

And not only that, these precious woods were to serve as the price for Tonneburg asking for help from Col, who could absolve them of the doubt that they were a heretical community amid the huge commotion surrounding the Church. The port town of Karlan took advantage of the situation, and was looking to build a road through the forest while also procuring lumber for itself.

And since all of that lumber was going straight to Eve, it was not unthinkable to suspect that Eve might have orchestrated a grand plan to pocket these riches, considering the scale of festivities in the tavern.

It made sense that Matthias, who was stalwart and hardy and had no interest

in anything flashy, would be disappointed in what Eve was doing, and it was perfectly reasonable that he would wonder if the Karlan merchants were being deceived by her.

“Matthias’s objectives and Karlan’s plan all lead to Eve. Not only that, it sounds like she’s been staying here for the past few days, even though this place isn’t very big. If Eve’s taking on such a big job herself, then she would have way too much to do, and that must mean there is a *lot* of money in this.”

He could only think that she was plotting something nefarious yet again, but all he had pictured at the beginning quickly crumbled like a tower of sugar, and Holo licked her lips.

All he knew was that even if there were no bad people here, that did not mean a tragedy was not on the horizon. That was simply the way of the world.

The truth was that the Tonneburg Woods were very much in danger.

“I believe Eve herself will answer our last question, at least.”

There came a round of applause louder than all the rest. The dancing girl had returned to Eve and was showered in appreciation and praise. The tavern patrons seemed intent on continuing to enjoy the festivities, but Eve and all the distinguished guests around her exchanged handshakes. It seemed their business was finished.

When Holo saw that, she began stuffing her mouth with the meat, as though recognizing she had made too much pointless conversation.

“We can just take that home, you know,” Lawrence said with a sigh.

Holo, whose cheeks were stuffed like a squirrel’s, hurriedly swallowed and said, “It matters not. Can you order another?”

She gave an innocent smile, meat juices dripping from the corner of her mouth. When Lawrence saw that, he gave the deepest sigh he had made all day.

Lawrence and Holo sat in the carriage Eve hired for them, traversing Karlan’s bumpy roads.

He thought the carriage was a bit much, considering Karlan was not all that

big, but Eve was based away from the city center at the seaport.

“Why here?”

It was in an inconvenient spot, loud throughout the day with the constant loading and unloading of cargo, and it took the brunt of bad weather coming from the sea. The only buildings that stood here were warehouses owned by trading companies—it was hardly a place for a traveler with money to find a comfortable stay.

One of Eve’s underlings waited for their return at a big door, one half of the entrance open—it was clearly a loading dock. The windows on the second and third floors were reinforced with metal framing to withstand harsh wind and rain.

The walls even had metallic rat guards on them, ones that looked like decoration and were meant to keep away brazen thieves. It was immediately obvious that it was not comfortable inside.

“It’s what I’m used to. Whenever I sleep in an unfamiliar town, I always pick buildings reminiscent of the old eras of war.”

Lawrence’s smile in response was tense—what she said made it seem like she was still crossing dangerous bridges.

There was likely a reason she always stayed by the sea, too. It was easier to escape if the need ever arose.

“But it seems like you still need a few drinks, don’t you?”

Eve glanced behind Lawrence at Holo and smiled wryly. In Holo’s arms were packets stuffed with food, and the bag atop her head was filled with freshly baked bread.

“A feast always comes with food and drink.”

Though he would likely mask it as not wanting Holo to eat alone, Lawrence had scarcely eaten everything since the conversation had distracted him, and she had hopefully saved him a portion, too.

“There is no moon tonight, but no clouds either. Let’s head to the courtyard.”

Eve gave orders to her subordinates and led both of them inside.

The building was currently in use as a warehouse, so it was packed with cargo.

It was likely that Eve herself was doing some trading herself, but Lawrence also knew that stacking wares like this was a tactic to prevent attackers from swarming her at once. A friendly mercenary had told him that once.

Old buildings often came with a central courtyard where defenders could hole up in case of a siege. It was also a place where preserved foods could be buried in the ground, or alternatively it could be turned into a plot to grow food.

But the era where such things were needed was long past.

Now it was a neatly maintained garden, one with a few fruit-bearing trees.

A table was soon brought out, and candles were lit.

“Oh ho. Perhaps we should hold events like this at the bathhouse,” Holo suggested, but all the guests were thoroughly drunk come nightfall, and nothing this fancy ever took place.

“To our reunion.” Eve first lifted her glass for the toast. “But goodness me. Just look at you.”

Lawrence thought she was talking about Holo, who was busy chomping on her meat, but she was, in fact, looking at him.

“You live in the remote land of Nyohhira, running a bathhouse. You made that fairy tale come true. But here you are again, back in the mortal world. Making some quick coin?”

“We actually...left for a few reasons.”

Lawrence felt deflated, his response mumbled. It was almost hard to think that not long ago he was so worked up, he wanted to tie Eve to a chair and interrogate her. He found refuge in strong, good-quality wine.

“This fool worries for his daughter,” Holo interjected.

Eve nodded in understanding. “Col is a grown man now, after all.” She immediately understood, and she gave a strained smile.

“Reminds me of when my granddad used to be around.”

Eve used to be a daughter of nobility.

“The letters have stopped coming recently. And...” Lawrence glanced at Holo. “Without our noisy daughter and precious Col around, someone’s been feeling a little lonely. It’s quiet in the bathhouse now.”

Their days had been happy, but Holo had been afraid that they would slip from her fingers and forget it all.

The time she spent hugging her diary had lessened, perhaps because she had been enjoying the traveling, but Holo bared her canines when he brought it up.

“You’re so cute,” Eve smiled in her delight, and her gaze darted toward the entrance.

There came the girl who had been dancing at the tavern—she seemed refreshed, as though she had just come from the bath. She first gave Eve, and then Lawrence a willowy smile.

Eve said something to her in a foreign language, and then poured her a drink.

“All business talks go very smoothly whenever I bring her to the taverns,” Eve said. It sounded somewhat like an excuse, but Lawrence simply nodded in agreement.

“Now. I believe your wife will have explained to you that I’m not ruthlessly making money here.”

Lawrence took a sip of his wine, switching the gears in his head.

“Lord Tonneburg has informed me of the situation, too. He must offer the lumber from his forest in exchange for protection from the Twilight Cardinal.”

All things had a price. Yet the reason Col had left the bathhouse was because he had been unable to accept the Church’s blatant greed.

This whole plan seemed to be completely at odds with Col’s values.

“Let’s cut this problem down to size,” Eve said, putting her filled glass down. “We’ve received word that both Karlan and Tonneburg want to side with the Twilight Cardinal. That is the truth. But the lumber is not the price for that.”

“Then what is it for?”

“Wool.”

That caught Lawrence by such surprise that he found himself glancing toward Holo. Her cheeks were full of marinated beef shank as she stared at him blankly in return, which told him that Eve was not lying.

“I *could* make ridiculous amounts of money if I wanted. I am certainly in a position to do so. But I already decided that I would not betray little Col.”

Lawrence narrowed his eyes, doubtful, and Eve drew up her shoulders.

“Look, they got me over there, in one of the Winfiel ports. They’re as persistent as you used to be, and they sniffed out the false bottom of the hidden depths of my plans. It was awful. They had me screaming and running with my tail between my legs.”

Holo was laughing, but Lawrence was not entirely sure that had been mentioned in any of the letters.

Col must have smoothed the rough edges of the incidents on their journey when he wrote about them in their letters so that they would not worry. That was the sort of person he was.

“And whenever it seemed like he was going to give up, he always had that silver wolf by his side. She’s got way more energy than this wolf here. Only an idiot would make an enemy out of those two. And I am not an idiot.”

Eve was not spineless enough to choose to side with them simply because she liked them (or not).

Lawrence did not know what sort of plot she had concocted, but she had likely planted the seed of gold, taking advantage of the chaos across the world that surrounded the Church.

“It seems there is a clear line between loss and profit here,” Lawrence remarked. “I’m relieved.”

Eve jerked her chin. “And their affection for each other gives you two a run for your money. I had front row seats to that.”

Lawrence pursed his lips at her tease, and Holo cackled.

“Anyway. Everyone needs lumber right now. It’s not easy to get in bulk. The Winfiel Kingdom, especially—it’s the land of sheep. All the forests were cut

down long ago, so they have no choice but to rely on the mainland for it.”

Lawrence and Holo once ventured to the kingdom together. They had visited a monastery where sheep spirits lived secretly among the regular sheep, and had seen never-ending stretches of field.

“And so I’m here to secure some. But of course, I’m not here to trade the Twilight Cardinal’s gracious authority for lumber, no matter how much they need. That cute little Col will be as furious with me as an inquisitor if I did.”

“.....”

A half-hearted smile crossed Lawrence’s face at the exaggeration, but Eve did not smile.

“Forget that—I make him a little sad, and that stubborn little wolf will immediately turn her fangs on me. I think they’re turning me into an angelic merchant.”

It was Holo’s discretion that allowed Myuri to accompany Col on his journey, and perhaps that ultimate judgment was the reason why she was called the wisewolf.

Col was earnest and had such a strong sense of right and wrong that it made Lawrence nervous sometimes; having an ally like Myuri, who unconditionally stuck by his side, armed with the raw power of fang and claw, was almost necessary.

Even if the *unconditional* part of that statement made her father Lawrence very antsy.

“I plan to trade lumber and wool at market price. But I’ve put in an order for as much lumber as possible. So if Lord Tonneburg feels like his forest is in danger, then that’s the fault of the people from Karlan.”

It was much too early to tell if Eve was shifting the blame for what was happening. Matthias himself did not trust the merchants from Karlan.

“He thinks that if he does not fulfill your order, then he won’t get any protection from the Twilight Cardinal. What do you have to say about that?”

Lawrence’s question was cutting, but Eve only canted her head to the side.

“They’re welcome to think that, but we have no intention of doing so. I’m just here because I have a need to trade here.”

Lawrence made a mental note to investigate whether or not that statement was true, and only nodded in affirmation for the moment.

“Then is the reason the Karlan merchants are trying to gather as much lumber as possible because they’re trying to make this trade as big as they can, then make a profit through mediation fees?”

“That’s possible,” Eve said, and paused to think for a moment. “Have you heard about the tariffs in this town?”

The strangest topic arose at the most unexpected time.

“I have. I was wondering what sort of things they were planning,” Lawrence said, but he also quietly wondered to himself if this was Eve’s plan, as she was attempting to absorb as much cheap lumber as possible.

“They have it rough here since they started developing late. But they’re full of pluck. They’re doing everything they can to grow the city. I like the atmosphere it creates, but that’s just a part of it.”

Back in Tonneburg, Lawrence had sat before the map and mused about this and that. Karlan was surrounded by opposing forces on all sides, and their only option for a trade breakthrough was the planned road through Tonneburg.

“Karlan wants to expand by lowering their taxes.”

But what Eve ultimately said was so unexpected that Lawrence almost missed it.

“...What?”

“Don’t give me that. You used to be a merchant, didn’t you? Didn’t you look at the duty listings at the towns you stopped in to see where its opinions lay?”

Lawrence blinked, hurriedly rummaging through his brain.

Tax was often thought as something the rich and powerful levied to line their own pockets, and while those cases did exist, they were mostly put to use for the sake of the public.

Tariffs were a specific type of tax that were unique, and their effects were slightly different from other taxes. In a way, they acted as a city's walls.

Tariffs dictated what goods could easily come in and out of a city. For example, if there was a city home to many furriers, then imported furs would be subject to high import fees to protect the artisans; any food that came into a town that could not produce its own foodstuffs was practically free, yet it would cost a pretty penny to take any food out of the town, which meant food would effectively gather within the town.

And so what sort of situation would bring about rumors that tariffs for *all* incoming items would be removed? Especially considering the town was planning on expanding.

"Is the city planning on absorbing all of the raw material?"

Eve nodded. "The people here have been wanting to cut down the Tonneburg Woods and build a road through it for ages, but it's too much work for only the people of a city this size to undertake. And while Lord Tonneburg isn't a fool, he's too kind. He said he would only agree to building the road if his people would not be whipped while working on it."

One often saw the commonfolk being treated like slave labor in large construction projects.

While Lawrence was both relieved and understanding that Matthias was not that sort of lord, they would still need a lot of workers to help cut down the forest. And hiring workers did not end when the call was put out and the desired number of people approached. They needed a place to sleep, they needed rations to eat and drink. In their old journeys, they had come across a place where a waterwheel was under construction, and he had made a fortune bringing in bread and grilled meats to the workers amid the chaos when they realized they were out of food.

If they were to collect all of the people needed to cut down the trees and build the road, then find a place to house them, then they would have to collect many raw building materials, even if it meant doing away with the city tariffs entirely.

"The city looked at its own circumstances, how the world was progressing,

and came up with a plan. It's not a perfect plan, and it was easily ruined by some merchant out in Salonia. All that has agitated everything, and it's perfectly reasonable for people like Lord Tonneburg to start doubting if things will really be all right. There are fickle rich people out there like me, after all. But—" Eve gave a faint smile, looked at the drink in her hand, and closed her eyes. "—I just *love* that positive greed."

All Lawrence could do was try and picture what sort of business ventures were playing behind her eyelids.

Perhaps the fight she had with Lawrence in Lenos and the way she almost died in Kerube were fun memories for her now.

But as he studied her placid smile, a thought came to him.

Eve did not hate anything right now.

She was simply concentrating on what she loved most—trade—and was having the time of her life.

"Same with the tavern. They're trying so hard to learn about southern food and dances because it's part of their grand plan. They want to start accommodating trade ships from the south, you know."

The food Holo had brought with her from the tavern was all slathered in pungent spice.

Though it was not exactly refined, it was plenty exotic.

"Don't those kinds of ships all go to Kerube?"

"Pretend you've come a long way and you've been served local food you don't really understand. What would you do if you knew there was a place offering familiar food from your own hometown? Even if it is a little out of the way, everyone would still go there instead."

In all honesty, Lawrence had led a wanderer's life for so long that he did not really understand what sort of meaning food could have.

But once, when he and Holo first started traveling together, she had been so nervous and upset that all the places they visited had transformed beyond her recognition. And so when a dish she used to eat was served to her, she had

shed tears of relief.

“And it’s thanks to Col that all the big southern companies that deal in luxury goods have been thrown into utter chaos. Their highest-paying customers have traditionally been from the Church, only they’ve all stopped buying. The big companies who deal in expensive items from the deserts all complain while they send boats up north this way. Even though they were ones that never gave us product, no matter how much we asked.”

And that was the only time Eve flashed a wicked smile.

They were trading partners that had given even her a rough time.

Lawrence felt like he had gotten just a tiny glimpse of the troubles that plagued the Debau Company, the people who safely delivered all the goods they needed for the bathhouse; when he realized how wretched he was for thinking it would be cheaper to obtain those very same things via Karlan, he immediately regretted it.

“The large port cities that used to be the main ones have been constantly betrayed by the southerners’ greed, so they’re trying to beat down prices in retaliation. So here, if they put Karlan in their debt and manage to secure this deal, then it’ll be a huge investment into the future.”

Lawrence would never say that running the bathhouse in Nyohhira was easy or boring.

But he got a whiff of grand, noble trade from Eve’s story that did not come with the day-to-day minutiae of the bathhouse.

Anyone who had walked silently on their own two feet for profit to the top of the hill could picture the brilliant future in the distance.

The moment he recalled the scent of the dusty earth from that point in time, he was kicked under the table. He looked over in his shock to see that Holo was grumpily eating her meat, not even looking at him.

Perhaps Holo had gotten the same sense that he did when he saw her gaze deep into the forest outside the Tonneburg smithy. He reached out to pat her head, to tell her that he was not going anywhere, but she swatted his hand away.

He gave a self-effacing smile at her indifference and turned to Eve.

“I now understand why you were making merry, why the tavern seemed as gaudy as it did, and why Lord Tonneburg doubts the eager Karlan merchants. And that you are not trampling over Col and Myuri’s feelings or working against them.”

Eve only closed her eyes and shrugged.

“The last thing I want to ask you is if you really need all the lumber the forest has to offer.”

Eve’s eyes remained closed, and Holo’s red irises stared at her.

“What on earth could you be using all that for?”

Lawrence knew that everyone needed lumber at the present.

Eve was not making unfair demands, and it seemed she was getting what she could by bartering wool. And he could tell that Karlan was using Matthias, Lord of Tonneburg, their lumber supplier, as a way to gain Col’s protection.

But in a plan where everyone benefits, it seemed Tonneburg was the only one that was losing out.

What happened in Salonia caused something in Lawrence’s chest to pang, but that just meant he could do some more work here to protect Tonneburg, just like last time.

If he was able to cut down on the lumber that was to be handed over to Eve, then he could prevent that much damage to the Tonneburg Woods. And that, too, might suppress the effects the cutting would have on the great wheat fields.

He knew there was a lot of hope in the thought, but he wanted to make sure it was possible.

But Eve’s expression coolly saw through his wishes.

“This isn’t a nice answer,” she said, looking to Lawrence with a sharpness that reminded him of the past.

“Merchants never want to hear nice answers.”

The wolfish merchant gave a grin and lifted her head. “Col and Myuri are causing quite a stir.”

“They are.”

“Big enough to split the world in two. There are storms whipping up everywhere.”

Eve swirled the glass in her hand, creating a whirlpool with her drink.

She kept going, and some droplets eventually leaped out.

“Look at that. People are getting ejected from the equation left and right.”

The girl sitting next to her reached out to wipe her wet hand, but Eve instead lifted it and licked away the droplets.

“Merchants might be different in their likes, personalities, and thought processes, but they’ll always reach a deal when there’s profit to be had. But there are things we can’t always profit on, and one of those things is faith.”

In that moment, Lawrence recalled how nervous Matthias looked when he informed Lawrence which side of the church conflict he took.

“There are people who the local rulers decided have different faiths, and are treating them like heretics of the past. But Col and Myuri have gained too much power for even the Church conservatives to simply brush them off as mere heretics. And so while the Church is not threatening them with excommunication or being burned at the stake, it’s a lot like finding pebbles in a sack filled with wheat. You’re going to have to get those out at some point.”

Lawrence nodded slowly. “Are you working to save these displaced people?”

Eve scrunched up her face when she heard that, acting like a child that wanted to be seen as an evil merchant. When she spoke, it came out quickly, like an excuse.

“I have a lot resting on Col. If he stumbles, then my business fails. I’m just getting rid of the pebbles that don’t belong.”

Lawrence could easily picture Col pained by the news that his own actions were causing people to be chased from their homes. He wondered what Eve thought when she saw the same sight.

Holo trusted her, which meant she had to be a good person deep down.

“Then is it true you want to settle talks before winter comes?”

Eve sulked, averting her eyes as she answered. “The kingdom is colder than it is here. If we did accept refugees only to end up treating them like beggars, then Col’s reputation would fall.”

They would have to build houses to shelter them. And with more people, they would need more kindling to warm the houses. No amount of lumber would ever be enough.

“We’d need ships to transport the refugees. And honestly, if we had the ships, they’d rather—”

“Hmm?”

Eve suddenly fell silent; Lawrence looked at her curiously.

She sighed and shrugged. “It’s nothing. You should ask them for the details yourself. That’s why you left the bathhouse, isn’t it?”

What was this about ships? Lawrence and Holo found themselves exchanging glances.

“Col and that little knight of a wolf are a whole lot more reckless than our generation. I’m worried.”

Her expression was anxious; this was not an act.

But it was not so much apprehension regarding genuine danger, but a nervousness about what was to come.

Though it did not seem to be that they were in any sort of pressing situation, Col still had the rambunctious Myuri by his side, and it was very likely that she was plotting something ridiculous.

Lawrence decided that once this was all squared away, he would ask Eve where the two of them were, and check up on them.

“Anyway, back on topic. The gist of all of this is that we don’t have enough of anything.”

Lawrence nodded, and a thought came to him.

“Could Karlan be counting on these refugees to cut down the Tonneburg Woods?”

Meyer said that Karlan was intent on changing the map, and Eve said that Karlan was intent on making the city bigger. And if all they did was make the container bigger without filling it with anything, all that would produce would be a hollow echo.

They would need more people to keep the city functioning, but people did not grow on trees or in the fields. They were not so easy to gather.

“Exactly. There are some who prefer to be on contiguous land with their homeland instead of separated by sea in the kingdom. But in my view, there are only so many people this city can take.”

“It seems to me there’s plenty of room for expansion, though,” Lawrence said, and then immediately realized how shallow the thought was. “Oh, right... Mouths to feed.”

Everyone needed to work to survive, but a population increase did not necessarily mean the same amount of work would suddenly pop up.

“There’s the road to build, at least for the time being.”

But then one day, there would be no more clearing work.

At last, all the things Meyer told him connected in Lawrence’s head.

“And that’s why they’re going to build new smithies and coal-burning huts in anticipation of that...”

Meyer was indignant that Karlan was selfishly trying to absorb all of what the forest had to offer, but that was not quite what was going on here.

Karlan was putting together a stopgap plan, but one that did actually account for the future.

While some stopgap apprehension was unavoidable, Lawrence could clearly see that they had thought through this, trying to prevent such a big plan from failing under its own size and weight.

“But...will this genuinely work out?”

Even if new industries came about from the cutting of the forest, that still meant they would not be able to feed the livestock, and the wheat fields would go through a poor harvest, and thus the people would starve.

It was dangerous to keep making speculations like this, and history could teach them that the problem of importing people was a difficult one. To accept a great number of people escaping the fires of war out of the mercy of one's heart—only for that same city to eventually fail—was a story that had repeated itself over and over in times of war. There was good reason why Rahden, who had built a pond for his hatchery to feed his people, had been called a bishop and worshipped.

"I am not a god," Eve said with divine arrogance. "Trade is always an uncertain gamble. And Karlan has decided to take on a huge gamble. Lord Tonneburg may have agreed reluctantly, but he still agreed because he saw profit in it. And so he's still at the table."

And that was when Lawrence finally realized that whether Matthias left the table hinged on what sort of report Lawrence brought back for him.

"Are you being kind to me right now so that I'll bring back good word to Lord Tonneburg?"

Instead of giving an answer either way, Eve grinned. Perhaps she had told them about Col and Myuri in order to bind their hearts. She knew that since they had left Nyohhira out of worry for their children, then they would not make decisions that would render all their hard work moot.

And yet, Matthias scarcely had any choice left. If anything, Lawrence wanted to praise Karlan for an incredible amount of self-control for not immediately preying upon Matthias's weaknesses after hearing the whole story. The people of Karlan were genuinely thinking about the development of their city; they were looking at things in the long term and were determined to build a favorable relationship with Tonneburg.

"I know you're a perfectly capable merchant. That's why I don't think you're going to manipulate this decision."

That's a rich thing to say, Lawrence thought, flashing a smile he would never use when running the bathhouse.

“Instead, I’m going to ask you to light a little fire under that wooden ass of his.”

“Regardless of whether he says yes or no?”

Winter was not very far away, and it was likely that a stream of refugees from the continent were already on their way. If their plan to procure lumber fell through now, then they would have to immediately move on to the next step.

Though that is what Lawrence initially thought, Eve shook her head and furrowed her brow.

“If we let this opportunity slip, then even if the lord signs his name on parchment, it’d just end up a useless piece of writing.”

Holo, who was full from her food and was now nursing her drink, pricked up her ears under her hood at the thorny tone of Eve’s words.

“There are people out there who’ve been raring to ruin this entire transaction.”

“There are?”

The first thing Lawrence thought of were the people in the Church that Col and Myuri were currently pressuring. It would not be a particular surprise if the Church old guard dispatched an army to subjugate Tonneburg if they realized they would be siding with Col. Declaring them heretics would be a simple justification.

Though that was his first thought, he realized something strange about that right away.

Matthias had to join Col’s camp precisely to prevent that from happening. If joining Col’s side meant declaring himself a heretic, then Matthias would have to go against his personal beliefs and side with the Church old guard. Just as Eve explained, if an entity was seen as a part of Col’s side once, then they could no longer easily reach out to the conservative side of the Church. It would have to have been a definitive decision to join Col’s side.

And so, if the Church really were the ones ruining things, then the entire situation would only be going around in circles.

That meant the ones meddling with the plan could not be the Church.

Who were they, then?

Lawrence thought, and recalled what the forest-loving ranger said to him.

“A mean-spirited...older brother?”

Eve snorted. “There’s no way Kerube is just sitting to the side and watching this deal happen quietly.”

Trade was the act of taking gold from one another, where there were limited places for gold to go, and Karlan was in the middle of its plans to expand its territory. And what about those whose territory was at risk of being taken?

“Do you know who rules Kerube right now? A pain in my neck,” Eve said and reached up to rub at said neck.

Years ago, when Lawrence and Eve were still young, they had gotten embroiled in such an intense trade battle that they had drawn daggers at each other.

After earning her money, Eve had been strung up and almost died.

Who was the one she had faced at the time?

When she smiled, she looked like a wolf baring its fangs.

In the distance, they could hear a howl going up.

CHAPTER FOUR



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A brisk, clear sky extended beyond the open window.

As Lawrence sat staring over the town, a gentle breeze, smelling faintly of the sea, brushed over his cheek.

The soft sounds of a comb running through fur tickled his ears, and an occasional sweet fragrance drifted past him and out the window.

He turned back to look into the room to see Holo tending to her tail, so thick and luxurious with fur that it would shock even a noble's daughter, with three bottles of expensive oils lying beside her on the bed.

He could almost hear Elsa scolding him; but as he watched Holo absently, he continued to think.

After the meeting from the previous night, Eve had said to him, *"No matter what happens, conflict with Kerube is unavoidable."*

Though she had not drunk to excess, Holo had still consumed enough that she was wheedling him for attention; and when he took her back to the inn, he had finally gotten the entire picture of the situation in his head, and it weighed on him.

What sat before him was not a simple situation where a regional lord's personal forest was being sold off. It was a situation that would affect the flow of trade for the entirety of the region well into the future, and even had to do with Col's fight against the Church, which had effectively split the world in two.

This was not something a mere bathhouse owner should be sticking his neck into, but for some reason, he had connections with each of the major parties in play. And more importantly, he was the one who lit the spark by preventing the lowering of lumber tariffs in Salonia.

If Lawrence had any faith, then he would consider this a God-given trial.

“I must add more pages to my journal.”

But his wolf wife spoke of other matters in response to his musings. She was in a better mood after speaking with Eve the previous night.

She was somewhat shy, so knowing that she was in familiar company allowed her to talk freely about Col, Myuri, and even memories of Kerube rather than feel obligated to discuss the unfamiliar likes of Tonneburg and Karlan.

She was occasionally more maiden-like than her own daughter, but that was something she often forgot.

“Just because we know all these people, that doesn’t mean this is going to be a carefree affair. We’re up against real merchants here.” Lawrence stepped away from the window, sat down on his bed, and looked over at Holo in the bed beside his. “Kieman almost killed Eve during the narwhal incident, but the moment their interests aligned, they started working together. He will be a genuine enemy if our interests conflict again.”

Holo lightly furrowed her brow as though surprised by the reminder.

“But it did not seem as though she was lying when she spoke of little Col and that fool Myuri.”

Her tone when she said “I’m worried,” seemed forced, but that had apparently been her genuine feelings on the matter.

“In my perspective, it does not seem like she chases profit at the cost of everything else anymore. Which, I feel, means this will not lead to the trouble she might have once caused.”

Holo ran her hand through her tail one final time, pleased with how glossy it was.

“On a personal level, sure. But both Eve and Kieman are merchants who have always chased what they think will be big game.”

Holo, her tail still in her hand, went blank for a brief moment. That was because Lawrence had been laying the groundwork to become a great merchant in the Debau Company, yet it was her own fault that his access to that path was cut off. And that bothered her. That praiseworthy look on her face,

one he saw not too long ago, tickled him; he continued.

“Big doesn’t always mean better.”

As he said that, he considered how Holo may have seemed a slender girl, but her true form was a towering wolf.

“When things get big, then all sorts of other things get tangled up in it, even if it has nothing to do with your own personal motivations. Think of a bull in a porcelain shop.”

“A bull?” Holo blinked.

“Try and picture a huge bull in a small shop full of porcelain. That can only end in tragedy.”

“Mm.”

“It means that bigger things will also make things a lot tighter.”

Holo would certainly understand—she had been under immense pressure when humans decided she was a divine being and worshipped her purely because of the majesty of her powerful wolf form. Perhaps taking on the appearance of a delicate girl and letting others dote on her as much as she liked was a sort of retaliation.

“Kieman represents Kerube, and Eve is working for Col. There might not be a lot of room for either of them to factor in their personal feelings. Even if they wanted to compromise or concede in certain ways, everyone else around them won’t let them do that.” Lawrence lay down on the bed as he spoke. “If Eve wanted to get serious about this, then she would pull Karlan’s plan together in an instant with the force of a thunderclap. Both Matthias and Meyer are good people, and looking at the tavern back in Karlan, I’d say the merchants they’re working with are just as positive as they are. The tavern owners are inviting in people of high status and even learning how to cook new dishes in order to help their city grow—that’s not something you hear about very often. If a bad person like Eve wanted to, she could take control of this entire situation.”

Holo had some personal opinions when it came to how optimistic people walked without ever watching their step. She gave a thoughtful nod.

“Then, once she’s used clever ways to settle the matter, she would collect her profits, not caring what problems she caused on the way out, then totally vanish. But she’s not doing that. She’s letting things play out as they will, which means I think she’s genuinely doing this for Col’s sake.”

Eve had apparently asked Holo what it felt like to create a weakness for oneself as they sat in the baths together.

Eve had acted the part of wounded wolf and bared her fangs, making the whole world her enemy, yet before her a larger wolf walked alongside a foolish sheep just a few paces ahead of her.

Something about that must have seemed ridiculous to her.

Her guards had been hard at work, and the dancing girl had genuinely enjoyed dancing.

Eve had come out of the hollow of her tree, found allies she could trust, and changed the way she interacted with the world.

“But she’s letting Kerube get in the way because of it. That’s what I think, at least.”

“Mm. But how exactly are they getting in the way? Kerube is not close enough that the shadow of their house darkens Karlan’s home. There is quite a distance between the two cities, so why do they feel the need to fight?”

From Holo’s perspective, who knew just how lively Kerube could be, Karlan was a small little place that was completely eclipsed by the other city on several levels. She did not understand why the massive Kerube would be genuinely angry if Karlan were to expand its trading area by just a small bit.

“Kerube was originally a port city that thrived off fur and lumber that came from Lenos. And so the trade makeup in Kerube and Karlan is already very similar. If they both participate in sea trade, then the products they deal in would only grow even more similar. There’s nothing more unpleasant to have in a trade rival than this, and I bet they’re already competing daily for wool from the kingdom.”

Wool was Winfiel’s special export, and it was valued in markets throughout the world. It was considered a product that brought in endless profits. The more

you could get, the better.

Eve's main business these days was the wool trade, and she was apparently moving wool for a number of trading companies. Though she might not be using her connection with Col for nefarious purposes, there was no doubt she was shrewdly claiming the most favorable position as the merchant who stood closest to the Twilight Cardinal, who in turn held sway over the trends of the kingdom.

So when Karlan decided to become a bigger city, it was unlikely that determination of theirs had much effect on Eve. The biggest reason she was here was because she wanted to buy Karlan's favor for cheap, sell her wool at a high price, and get as much lumber as she possibly could.

And nothing was infinite, so she was likely deducting the increased portion of wool imported to Karlan from Kerube's allotment.

"You merchants are truly fools. None of you have any flexibility."

It was a sound statement, but Holo was the sort to grab everything for herself when served delicious food at a tavern. Lawrence smiled as he gazed at her, and she returned it with a sharp glare.

"Is there something you wish to say?"

"Nothing at all." Lawrence shrugged and continued, "And I think the one spurring this on might be Eve, who might be provoking Kerube deliberately, to a degree."

"..."

Holo's shapely brows arched like a cat's long tail.

"Kerube is the oldest port city in this region, and of the biggest scale. That means they're a powerful trade partner for the wool merchants from the kingdom. Not only that, Kerube deals in lumber from Lenos, too. The kingdom merchants don't have forests back home—they probably don't have much room to negotiate when dealing with Kerube."

"Do you mean that because they are taken advantage of in the lumber trade, they return the favor when the time comes to trade in wool?"

Lawrence shrugged, and Holo seemed tired of the incessant fights in the human world.

Just as Karlan wanted to avoid the territories of existing lords by building a road through the Tonneburg Woods, it would not be at all strange if Eve and the Winfiel Kingdom's wool merchants who worked with her wanted to secure a new place to sell their wool and where they could purchase lumber, a place that did not rely on Kerube, which was a tough trade partner. And this plan to develop Karlan was a valuable chance for them to make that happen.

"When you have two towns that share commercial interests, then it's almost inevitable that one city will flourish, and one will fail. It isn't a simple turf war. The losses are all too real."

When Lawrence said that, Holo released her tail as though she had enough, then curled up on the bed.

"I know it's a bit hard to understand with trade, but you'd understand wheat fields, right? Let's say there's a field that's just scarcely managed to support a village of a hundred people, but the neighboring village takes half of it. What do you think would happen to the first village?"

"Mm..."

Holo's ears both flicked nervously in every which way.

"You can't expand on your fields forever. That's the heart of the problem. The size of the field determines how many villagers get fed, so if you want everyone to eat their fill, you either make the fields bigger or you lower the number of mouths you need to feed."

Terrible talks of sending people away or selling people off into slavery was not something that ever came up during Holo's time in her old village, but not every farming community out in the world had been as lucky.

So why did conflict never cease?

"It's the same with trade. People who don't work don't get to eat, and if goods aren't transported, then no jobs are created. And all goods in circulation are limited. More product means more jobs, and more jobs means trading companies will take on new hires and help apprentices who worked long and

hard to start their own businesses. But if that doesn't happen, then they can't bring in new blood, and apprentices are kept on much longer than they're supposed to. The master artisans would feel ashamed being unable to reward the people who've toiled at their sides. If business slows down because of this, then even keeping their apprentices employed can become a challenge. And that's when they all start looking for new territory."

The reason Matthias agreed to have the forest cut down was likely an extension of that line of thought. Though Meyer feared that with the loss of all the forest had to offer, the surrounding wheat fields would not be as productive, Matthias still believed that cutting down the forest would, in the long run, be more beneficial for the people.

That was because expanding anything—be it a forest or a field—required land, and it was unlikely he would ever get more land without war. What options remained open to him depended on how efficiently he could make use of the forest.

Running a road through it and building smithies might dramatically deplete the forest, but thinking about Tonneburg as a whole, it might end up keeping the people better fed in the long run.

Upon hearing Lawrence's explanation, the hairs on Holo's freshly combed tail stood on end, making it seem much bigger than normal. That was not because her ignorance had been pointed out, but because she was angry at how cruel this world could be.

"So it isn't really anyone's fault."

Every camp had their excuses, and every camp had people worth protecting.

"But there is a difference in size."

There might be a way to save a hundred people by making ten people suffer.

Holo immediately frowned and got up from the bed, her desire to sleep gone.

When she came to stand by the window, she gazed out upon the peaceful city of Karlan.

Though a trade war would most certainly transform the forest, the conflict

itself was invisible to the eye, unlike a bloody war.

Holo finally realized that this lively, yet peaceful city stood at the crossroads of its own fate.

“Can you not do something about this?”

He was flattered that she thought so highly of him, but he could not find anything nice to say in response.

Though he had drawn the line in the matter—his request that she not be angry with him no matter what the outcome—that still did not make her feel any better about it.

“It’s a merchant’s job to make both parties walk away happy after a deal has been struck, but trading bread for bread doesn’t help fill our bellies. That would be magic,” Lawrence sighed and looked to the ceiling. “I have a feeling that’s what Eve is trying to get me to do.”

Holo turned around to look at him.

“We didn’t talk so much last night because it reminded us of old times, or because we’re particularly close. She wants me to talk to Lord Tonneburg and ask if he’ll have a change of heart. And—”

“You are an errand boy,” Holo said, as though displeased someone else was using her own errand boy.

“You could at least call me an assistant.”

Kieman, who was apparently running Kerube now, and Lawrence did know each other, of course.

And so Eve, who had occasionally gotten herself in trade quarrels with Kieman from across the strait, had decided that it would be much better to send Lawrence instead of going there herself.

At the end of their meeting the night before, Eve had asked him to be her assistant and negotiate with Kerube on her behalf.

“It’s not like I can give up on this now anyway. I have to do it.”

If they traced events back to the original cause of all this, then it led right back

to the moment Lawrence ventured to Salonia to settle a little matter he had been asked to take care of. And now, he was negotiating on behalf of a town and region. Life often took people in unexpected directions, and things were connected in unexpected ways. It was surprising that the bonds he formed once as a traveling merchant had now left such a big mark on the world, yes, but following those lines would naturally allow the past to catch up with him.

Lawrence had left behind the life of a traveling merchant, become a bathhouse owner, and had watched his reckless daughter grow old enough to set off on a journey of her own. Perhaps he felt somewhat obligated to look back and clean up any messes he had left behind.

“It’s weighing on me, of course.”

It was not just because he could see this was going to be a very involved negotiation. Kieman was a member of Lawrence’s old haunt, the Rowen Trade Guild. He was essentially an extended family member, making this a bit more complicated than a simple trade deal.

When they were building the Spice and Wolf bathhouse in Nyohhira, Kieman had helped out when they needed a loan from the Rowen Trade Guild, and even when Kieman’s business was in danger of failing, he did not go back on his word.

Though Lawrence was no longer an official member of the guild since he had retreated to Nyohhira, bonds forged with fellow guild members were not so easily dissolved, much like those with blood relatives.

And because of all that, Lawrence was, quite frankly, not looking forward to negotiating with Kieman, and by extension, Kerube, in an official capacity.

Lawrence was very aware of how soft he was.

“If only either were obviously evil, then you could have simply used my fangs,” Holo said, sensing what was on Lawrence’s mind.

“You’re right. In this kind of situation, the worst possible outcome is letting either side have a one-sided win.”

Lawrence rubbed at his ticklish nose, possibly due to how Holo had been tending to her tail, and then his hand drifted up to his forehead.

“Our goal is to make this a draw, but Karlan and Kerube are just so different in size and history.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s a matter of face.”

As Holo was about to bite into a burnt slice of meat, she frowned. They had both experienced how old-timers treated newcomers at the Nyohhira bathhouse. And when it came to cities, whose histories stretched back for generations, the scale of it only grew.

“And the nobles of Kerube betrayed Eve during the narwhal incident in Kerube. They’re probably wary about what she might do to get her revenge.”

Lawrence wondered if Karlan actually knew this and decided to go along with it regardless. Maybe it was because they were aware that there was no love lost between Eve and Kerube that they were confident she would never betray them.

“I suppose we cannot speak too arrogantly about digging up the past, either.”

Holo winced as she said that, while Lawrence shrugged.

“Eve doesn’t seem to be bothered by whether or not they hold a grudge.”

“Hmm?”

“People around her might make assumptions, and I wonder if Eve’s planning to use that to her advantage.”

Lawrence sat up, recalling the ways trade wars were conducted—something he never got a taste of in Nyohhira.

“If Kerube thinks that Eve is siding with Karlan for revenge, then she has the advantage in negotiations.”

It seemed like it was complicated, even for the self-professed wisewolf.

“In their minds, it would no longer be a matter of trade, but revenge. The natural conclusion would be that Eve isn’t thinking about profits and simply wants to take Kerube down even if it means ruining herself. It would be incredibly unwise to face her in a stand-up fight. Anyone who doesn’t want to

be dragged into a quagmire will have to make some sort of compromise. That means Eve would win without having to fight at all. That's what makes her a formidable merchant."

This natural deterrence could have been the reason Kerube had not resorted to violently obstructing the plans of their rivals. Eve was no ordinary merchant. She had not only accumulated great wealth, but she was now also on familiar terms with the Twilight Cardinal himself. In other words, she was a politically connected business owner. Not even Lawrence could imagine how the Kingdom of Winfiel and others would retaliate if she were to be harmed.

"But it's unlikely that Eve actually holds a serious grudge, and since she's in Col's court, I think she wants talks to go smoothly. And so from her perspective, she might be uneasy about how far she can go with this deterrent. That's why she wants us to throw me in the middle of all this before her bluff gets called."

It was hard to determine someone's true intentions when they wouldn't show their face. If an attendant sent to deal with an issue reports that something is black, even the whitest things can start to look different. That was what Lawrence had been asked to do.

"Mm...", Holo hummed, thought for a moment, then said, "Then how do you plan to negotiate? You must have something in mind."

"I don't," Lawrence replied readily.

Holo's eyes went wide, then narrowed in displeasure.

"I'm not teasing you. I'm serious. But it's not like I'm going in empty-handed."

She seemed like she did not understand at all.

Lawrence continued, "No one is going to be completely happy with the outcome. We just have to plan things out in order."

"In order?"

Holo's right ear twitched, followed by her left.

"For example, let's say we negotiated with Kerube just in case before Eve, Karlan, and Tonneburg finalized their contract. That would be a bad move."

Holo stepped away from the window, sat beside Lawrence, and thumped her

tail against the bed, indicating that she did not understand.

“A chain can’t be any stronger than its weakest link. The negotiations with Kerube will likely be drawn out and rough, so it’s possible Matthias will raise the white flag and give up on the whole thing.”

The wolf hummed again.

“First we talk to Matthias, then realize the contract with Col through Eve. A lord values their honor, so Matthias will probably hold up his end of the bargain once he signs it.”

Matthias was trustworthy in that regard from what Holo had seen in the forest; she thought back on it, and was satisfied.

“And on top of that, we have to calm Kerube’s anger. How we do that will... honestly depend on whether Kerube approaches this aggressively. But that’s a technique you use all the time, so you’re probably familiar with it.”

“I am?”

“Forcing someone to pay back a debt you pushed onto them.”

Though Holo flashed him a frown, she did not retaliate. That was likely because she had recalled how readily she had taken the mead from Meyer before listening to what he had to say, which then forced Lawrence to do exactly that. They would be using the same tactic here.

She folded her arms and listened, puffing out her cheeks as though ruminating over the bitter fact, but she soon made a face like sand had been mixed in with her food.

“Which means that fool...is trying to use you for more than she lets on.”

“Huh?”

“You are ideal. No—she would have jumped for joy if we were the ideal negotiators for her.”

How would Holo be of use in negotiations with Kerube?

As Lawrence followed her line of thought, she quickly elaborated on her point.

“Think about what might happen if talks become complicated. If she sends anyone else on her behalf, they may be arrested and put to death, like she once was. But who do you have by your side?” she huffed proudly.

“The Wisewolf.”

No matter how many times Lawrence got embroiled in trouble, Holo would always send fools packing. That put them at an advantage for many things.

Though it was hard to tell whether Eve was planning on throwing them to the wolves from the beginning, it was a fact that the two of them were ones she could send off without too much worry.

“...I bet she learned this by watching Col and Myuri.”

He pictured Myuri, the hair on her tail standing on end as she stood to protect the unreliable Col.

As a wry smile drew across his face, Holo bumped her shoulder against him.

“And this brings something else to my mind as well.” Holo, arms still folded across her chest, brought her legs up onto the bed and crossed them in thought. “We will not die in her neglect, yet she still throws us into a most troublesome negotiation.”

“That’s right.”

“Then that does not mean she will be promptly moving onto her next business venture, does it?”

“It—”

—*doesn’t*, was what he wanted to say, but could not say for certain.

Because she would be avoiding aimless negotiations, and she would still be winning if Kerube ran out of patience; the only problem was who would be taking the brunt of that wasted time.

“We have left our mountain bathhouse to leisurely check up on our daughter. She perhaps wrongly assumes we have too much time on our hands.”

Her glum tone was not finding fault with Eve’s craftiness but poking at the foolish sheep’s mind.

“And...we cannot bother little Col and Myuri.”

Because even if they could discern Eve’s true intentions, they had no choice but to work to make sure the plan reached completion. At the end of the day, they were essentially cleaning up the messes left in their children’s wake.

“It is almost as though it had been decided that you would be cornered here ever since you decided to stand before her,” Holo said. She was not finding fault with Eve after all; she was getting annoyed with the simple mind of this sheep before her, whose destination could be easily manipulated once put on the fence.

“You are quite easy to read for how comfortable you are with doing things with little foresight. I am surprised you survived long enough to meet me.”

“...”

All Lawrence could do was smile at that. The man she knew that was comfortable with doing things without thinking ahead had honestly been minding his business with mundane trade deals before he met her.

If he were to name the reason why he started doing things with little foresight, Holo would grin and wag her tail.

Because she already knew the reason why.

The reason she teased him like this now was because she wanted to hear him say it.

Holo had also skillfully corralled Lawrence in the direction she liked, but what set her and Eve apart was that Holo’s emotions were apparent in her ears and tail.

“The reason I constantly run into danger is because whenever I look at you, I always get carried away.”

Though his words had come out a bit stilted, it was exactly what Holo wanted to hear.

Holo looked at Lawrence like a taskmaster watching her apprentice during an examination. At length, she huffed, and then a satisfied expression crossed her face.

“You truly adore me, don’t you?”

Her freshly brushed tail whipped through the air.

Though their interactions had scarcely changed in the past decade, Lawrence had grown.

And so he wrapped his arms around the satisfied Holo and asked, “...Can you turn a blind eye to the Tonneburg Woods?”

Doing as Eve wished and advancing the project would mean convincing Matthias to join, too, and going through with the plan to cut down the woods. That would mean Lawrence would be giving up on protecting the forest for Holo’s sake.

Since they had Col and Myuri to think about, Holo understood that there was no other choice. And since she did not want Lawrence to push himself any more than he already had, she had prepared a way out for him.

“I do not mind. The lushest forests are no joy walked through alone.”

When Holo said this to him, Lawrence gave up on his dream of becoming a great merchant.

She flashed her canines in her smile, and then pressed her face into his shoulder.

“And the men of the forest are genuinely worried about their home. They will do everything they can, even if they cannot protect all of it. How could I call that a lost cause or wasted effort?”

When she lifted her head, her expression was at once wistful and somehow refreshed.

There was a great difference in their life spans, and Lawrence could not make Holo happy forever. This well of joy would one day dry up.

But to sate one’s thirst was not a wasted effort at all, and it was not a mistake to work hard to make it last just a little longer.

If it were, then they would have parted ways back in Lenos.

“But perhaps it would not be a bad idea to give that gluttonous squirrel a

good kick in the pants and bring her here to plant some of those acorns.”

Tanya was a squirrel spirit who had brought life roaring back to a mountain stripped of its forest due to mining.

That she only planted trees that bore her favorite nuts was her one obvious flaw, but trees that bore nuts typically lost their leaves in winter. That would prevent the forest from becoming an empty sea of conifers.

“Then we should move with haste. Let’s talk to Matthias.”

“Aye.”

“I’ll ask Eve to get me a fast horse, and you stay—ow!”

Lawrence, shocked by how Holo pinched his arm, looked down at her. She glared coolly at him.

“But wouldn’t it be strange if we both went together to send an urgent message?”

He would have no excuses if Matthias interpreted Holo’s presence as a lack of seriousness on his part. All he really had to do was think back on the past. Back to the time he went around asking for loans with Holo in tow and got yelled at for taking business lightly. Bringing that up now would only remind them both of awkward memories.

Though Holo knew this, she found the idea of staying behind on her own unbearable. That was not her childish spirit acting up, but her wolfish instinct to care for her pack. As that thought crossed Lawrence’s mind, she fixed him with another cool stare.

“This is precisely why I call you a foolish sheep.”

“Huh?”

Holo’s red eyes narrowed, and said with pronounced exasperation, “You tell me there is something shady about all this, yet you insist on leaving on your own. How do you intend on returning alive?”

Lawrence gulped, his gaze darting out the window.

“Is someone watching us?”

“That does not seem to be the case for now, but the moment you reach the forest, I wonder if some fellows with bows and arrows will just so happen to arrive at precisely the same time.”

Kerube wanted to put a stop to Karlan’s plan. But this was not the simple matter of a single company losing out on profits—this was a situation where a sizable city could be expected to hire a person or two who would be more than happy to do their dirty work.

Eve may have been glaring daggers at them, warning them that there would be dire consequences if they meddled in any way, but there was no telling how long that would last. Not only that, Tonneburg was a vulnerable target, and key to Karlan’s plans.

“So, um...”

“In truth, I would like to carry you on my back, but...it would also be strange if you were to appear not on horseback. You may go on horse. I will follow behind. The talks can take place in the forest, no? I will be able to pick out your voice well enough that way.”

Lawrence had known Holo for a long time, but he sometimes still stepped on her tail.

“Good grief. There are times I think you are impossibly elusive yet here you are, a simple fool!”

She was displeased because not only was Eve using him, but because he still did not understand a woman’s heart.

She stood from the bed without waiting for his answer and began preparations to head for Tonneburg, the fur on her tail still standing on end. As he watched her, Lawrence found himself amused.

Nyohhira was not a terrible place by any means, but he could only have interactions with Holo like this in the outside world.

“What do you think, dried meat or cured meat? Are you able to fit that pot on the horse, dear?”

And she was like this when she was serious, too. They had no choice but to do

the job given to them, according to Eve's will. Lawrence stood from the bed and began his own preparations to depart on a fast horse.

"I wonder what Eve would have done if we hadn't shown up."

Holo could think in terrible situations and would pull on Lawrence's reins, and had the strength to challenge any chaos if it came to that. But what about Tonneburg?

When Matthias came to them, he had appeared with conscripted soldiers who only took up arms and armor because it was their turn to do so.

He had a feeling things would be settled very quickly if Kerube sent some ruffians to make a mess of things.

"That forest guardian was skilled with his bow," Holo remarked, recalling how Meyer had shot a rabbit from horseback. "But he cannot win against numbers. Nor can he remain attached to the lord the entire time, and the old priest may be targeted as well."

Such a large territory did not lend itself well to defense. If they were supposed to defend their partners in this plan, then at least Matthias alone should remain in the town of Karlan. Or perhaps he regarded Eve with such suspicion that he might interpret that as being held prisoner.

"Mm. No, perhaps that fool was deliberately trying to provoke the lord into action."

For a moment, Lawrence did not understand, but he did after a moment of thought. Matthias was not a foolish ruler, so if Kerube was going to resort to force, he knew that he would likely be the first target.

Perhaps he had no choice but to take on the contract with Eve and Karlan in order to guarantee his own safety.

If Kerube were to genuinely threaten Matthias, then that would give Matthias an excuse to believe Eve. She would take him under the protection of the Twilight Cardinal while giving him that last bit of encouragement he needed to agree to the plan.

"But it's a risky gamble."

There was no telling if the thugs could rough up Matthias in the right way. It was unknown how they would break Matthias's spirit, and it was hard to think of it as a gamble with good chances.

As Holo carefully thought about how much meat she should pack, a thought suddenly came to Lawrence.

"Could...Eve be planning on doing that herself?"

There was a riddle: *What was the best way to make a prophecy come true?*

The answer was: *Fulfill it yourself.*

Eve *would* threaten Matthias without a second's hesitation to secure certainty.

"Eve never changes," Lawrence said, drawing his lips in a grimace, and tossed his things into his bag.

It felt like he himself had been dropped into the bag.

"Huh?"

In that moment, he had clearly seen the shadow of something unfathomably large. It was as though he was walking along the eaves of the buildings that lined the main street to cool off, only to pass beneath a massive creature instead of a building.

Lawrence had been, without question, walking the path of logic, yet it felt like he had come across an inconsistency in the most unexpected of places.

In his desperation, he reviewed his memories, seeing what facts he had lined up.

Due to the shady connection with Kerube, Holo had insisted on going with Lawrence in order to protect him. Tonneburg, especially, was an easy target. The ones protecting Matthias were levies of farmers who typically tended the fields, so it perhaps made more sense to keep him in Karlan.

But Matthias himself was not on very good terms with Eve or Karlan, so it was possible he would equate being asked to stay in the city with being taken captive.

It was then that Eve, who was overseeing the plan like so many pieces on a chessboard, would swoop in. In her kindness, it was unlikely she would worry too much about Matthias's safety. She might think that letting him get attacked would solidify the more indecisive parts of his attitude. But instead of gambling on the bad actors from Kerube hurting him just enough, it made more sense for her to orchestrate the violence and attack Matthias herself.

The signs lined up along the road in this manner, but Lawrence had a feeling something was clearly missing.

Lawrence took another step forward, and he felt like there was something he should have noticed.

"Argh... What is it? Damn it!"

He groaned and slapped his own forehead. His mind was stuffed full of the minutiae of running the bathhouse—there was no space for him to speculate as he so often did in his previous peddling journey. He cursed his fogged mind and began slowly piling up the bricks scattered across his thoughts.

And then there was the big assumption.

Ever since Holo brought up speaking to Eve in Nyohhira, Lawrence had let his guard down. But was Eve truly someone he could trust?

That did not have anything to do with whether or not Eve was a bad person, and as someone who walked the very same path of commerce as she did, he should have thought about her prowess first.

What was most alarming here was that Eve did not seem to hold any ill intent.

And to expand upon that, that meant it was likely the truth.

Not only that, but if on the off chance she *was* leading them into a trap, then she would not only sour her relationship with Col and Myuri, but she would also make an enemy of Holo. Eve knew it was impossible to run or hide if she truly earned Holo's ire.

And Lawrence was simple, much to Holo's chagrin. More importantly, since they shared a merchant's perspective, Eve saw him as a pawn she did not need to dupe.

In reality, the conclusion he and Holo had come up with together would have to be the truth if Eve was indeed manipulating the situation.

Which meant...

Was it his own imagination that made it seem like things did not add up?

No—this was much too odd. Kerube's desire to interfere and Matthias's defenselessness were faults too big for Eve to have overlooked.

And that told Lawrence there was still a piece of the puzzle he had not seen yet.

He thought, still as though listening for something, and looked around the room before his gaze settled on the open window.

What had they been through since leaving Salonia?

And...

"Dear, I would like some of the southern spices I had for dinner yesterday. Could you buy—"

Holo, who was treating this like a stroll in the woods, stopped.

Lawrence's lips twisted into a smile; he was simply delighted by how formidable Eve always was.

"Why... Why are you smiling?" Holo asked.

Lawrence sighed deeply and said, "It's nothing. We'll head to Tonneburg like planned. But—"

"But?"

Holo, whose arms were full with meat or the pot or one thing or another, looked up at him in confusion.

"—I want to make a detour."

Eve Bolan was a bad wolf, or perhaps a sly fox.

Her spells could not only set in motion great mischief, but could even align the stars and planets in her favor.

Lawrence sent word to Eve that they would be heading straight for Tonneburg

in order to speak with Matthias.

Eve was not particularly alarmed, nor was she jumping for joy; her response was as usual, like she was telling them to neatly take care of business.

After getting a horse, Lawrence and Holo both rode out of Karlan. And after riding a good distance in the direction of Tonneburg, the sun eventually set; and when the sun cast long shadows of the hills over the ground, they dismounted for a time. They tied up the horse to whatever tree they could find, and Holo braided loose hairs from her tail into its mane. It was unlikely thieves would find it after one night, and Holo's scent would keep the wild dogs away.

"I am not saying this because I am vexed." Holo, in her wolf form, allowed Lawrence to climb on her back, swiveling her head back to look at him with her large, red eyes. *"But are you not thinking too hard about this?"*

"If you said the same thing to me right after telling me about her, what do you think would've happened?"

Eve was absorbed in her self-indulgent pleasures and was hard to trust. She was using Col's dignity as a shield to do awful things as she pleased.

Lawrence had simply assumed that was the case, which earned Holo's exasperation. Yet Holo, in all her intelligence, remained quiet, and knew things would clear up once he saw her for himself.

Lawrence realized the exact same pattern was evident in this situation.

"Eve hasn't said anything specific about Kieman or Kerube."

Holo began to walk with light, easy steps, and slowly increased her speed. The sun had not yet fully hidden behind the horizon, so she was making doubly sure that no one could see them.

That included Eve's underlings.

It was likely that Eve told them about Holo's true form. They would be putting a lot of distance between them if they were to be following the couple, which meant that so long as they managed to get back on track the following morning, they would not be found out, even if they did take a detour.

"The one thing we should've taken into consideration wasn't Eve's intentions.

We should have questioned whether Kerube wanted to get in Karlan's way in the first place."

Holo went even faster, and Lawrence felt himself becoming a part of the wind.

The scenery around him melted, and all that was certain around him was the warmth of her fur and the power of her breath.

Yet Lawrence continued speaking.

"Every part of what Eve told us is based on the assumption that Kerube is our enemy. She spoke like it's a hard fact, like there's no point in questioning it. Of course, it's hard to imagine that Kerube is going to outright accept what Karlan is doing, so no doubt there's a conflict of interest between the two towns. Yet it's entirely possible that the actual nature of the conflict itself is entirely different."

Holo reached her full speed—even if a traveler did catch a glimpse at her from afar, she would only seem like a speck of dust in the shape of a wolf.

"The reason Eve has not directly negotiated with Kerube might not be because she's wary of interference or because she's throwing them off. Kerube might be troubled by their weak position in the matter."

Lawrence felt like the only reason Matthias was still safe as of now was because Kerube could not freely use force.

All they had heard about Kerube so far was secondhand through other people. Lawrence himself knew just how selfish and merciless the people of Kerube could be through his experience with the narwhal incident, so he assumed he had a general gist of the situation without Eve's detailed explanation. And he knew better than anyone else what she had gone through in that city.

The most important thing was that Eve knew everything as well. Plus, their interaction at the tavern should have shown her that Lawrence had not changed one bit.

The foolish sheep had jumped to conclusions after speaking with Matthias and marched right over to her.

All she needed to do was place her hands on his shoulders, change his trajectory, and he would willingly follow the path she wanted him to take.

“No falsehood escapes my ears.”

As Lawrence lay sprawled across Holo’s back, he could hear her voice reverberate into his body. He felt his stomach grow cold, and the floating sensation almost hurt his back.

Holo leaped from hill to hill, dashing down the sloped sides faster than rainfall.

“But I cannot hear what is not spoken. Just as you miss things when you jump to conclusions.”

That was not so much cynicism or a pointed jab at him as it was self-deprecation.

“But it’s only thanks to you we can make up for it.”

It was unlikely Eve thought that Lawrence would go to Kerube of his own accord.

He pictured negotiations with Kerube as delicate and dangerous, and Lawrence did not get the sense that Eve was acting arbitrarily for her own gain.

And that meant Eve could pull this off.

She could convince the sheep that the noises coming from the other side of the forest were from a pack of wolves.

“But if I am the reason you fall into holes every time, I am unsure if helping you climb back out really makes up for it.”

Holo had originally gotten them involved in this because she had been enticed by the smell of the forest on Meyer and his mead. And where Holo went, so did Lawrence, boldly claiming that she could leave it all to him. That was how they tumbled into the hole this time.

“Sounds like we were made for each other,” Lawrence said breezily.

A shudder that was not that of Holo’s feet hitting the ground resonated through his body.

"I, too, have grown foolish."

After all was said and done, Holo enjoyed the days they spent together.

"And it's possible that once we get to Kerube, we'll see that what Eve says is true. Don't get mad if it is."

"We shall see."

Though there was no obviously large dip in the road, Holo leaped a little higher than usual.

"It'll all be a nice memory of our journey, though!" Lawrence yelled from atop Holo's back.

Instead of giving an answer, Holo sped up, leaping high off the ground.

CHAPTER FIVE



CHAPTER FIVE

In the ten years since they last visited Kerube, it had grown into a city much livelier than they remembered. The north side of town, notably, which had been run down at the time, had now steadily developed, and the mouth of the river that separated the two sides of town was abuzz with a festive atmosphere.

Torchlight from the taverns reflected off the surface of the water, and melodies from bards came floating on the wind. If Lawrence left Holo to her own devices, she would surely spend the night here.

But perhaps she was satisfied after running as hard as she could from Karlan; with the fur on her tail mussed, she asked for only one cup of watered-down wine, and simply enjoyed the comfortable autumn breeze.

“...Well, if this isn’t a surprise.”

Lawrence, with Holo in tow, paid a visit to the Rowen Trade Guild trading house, and Kieman, who had sat around a table with other aged merchants, opened his eyes wide in surprise.

“I’m not imagining things, am I?”

It was a late hour where a more respectable merchant would return to their inn to prepare for the morrow. But who should appear out of the blue but an acquaintance who should, at the present moment, be working in the distant, deep mountains—of course even the most seasoned of merchants such as Kieman would be flustered.

“We have urgent business,” Lawrence replied boisterously.

Kieman gradually regained his senses, after which, he allowed them into the back.

He broached the topic just as drinks were served by the errand boys, who had likely been sleeping in their own little corner of the trading house, considering

the time.

“Is this about the Twilight Cardinal again?”

“Again?” Lawrence repeated, and Kieman blinked.

“Haven’t you heard? Those two came by not too long ago. It was so sudden, and they came spouting what sounded like nonsense.”

Lawrence wondered if they had missed something in one of Col and Myuri’s letters; he glanced at Holo, but Holo only tilted her head.

Kieman watched the exchange and gave them a knowing nod.

“I doubt they’re writing to you every detail of their adventure. It was the talk of the town for a while around these parts. People say the Twilight Cardinal guided a ghost ship to heaven.”

Myuri had indeed written about a ghost ship with great excitement in one of the letters.

But Kieman’s name had not been mentioned, nor was this heaven business.

What sort of adventures were they having beyond the content of their letters?

Lawrence hummed, and Kieman lifted his glass in a light chuckle.

“Anyway,” he said, changing the subject. “You said you had urgent business?”

“—Apologies. We do. Sorry for arriving so late.”

Kieman smiled. Holo sniffed her drink; the look on her face told Lawrence that what they were served at Eve’s was much better.

“It seems we’ll be working under Eve’s name before long in Karlan.”

Kieman froze—if witches existed and could petrify people with their spells, then this was probably what that would look like.

“...I see. This is appropriately urgent, then.”

When he finally squeezed out his voice, there was a vexed look in his eyes. Yet the corners of his mouth were still lifted in a smile.

“That snake of a woman... Using Lawrence as her insurance, I see.”

Holo, who had been sipping on her drink, glanced up at Lawrence. He noticed. They were right.

“Kerube acts in secret to obstruct Karlan’s development, all to protect its own trade,” Lawrence orated like a bard.

Kieman inhaled, his chest expanding to the point of bursting, and then sighed deeply.

“Do you understand how much trouble this has caused us?”

The candlelight made him seem so much skinnier.

Or perhaps it was just anxiety.

“How are you getting involved in Karlan, Lawrence? You seem to be on her side, so why have you come all the way out here to see me?”

Though he did not explicitly voice his suspicions that this meeting was a part of Eve’s strategy, Lawrence could see that it was a genuine question, but also the hesitation as to whether or not Kieman could trust them.

“It’s complicated,” Lawrence began. He informed him of the reason why they left Nyohhira, and Kieman was surprised by what happened in Salonia.

“That was *you*?!”

It was an exciting time, due to the festival, so word of the bizarre city had traveled across the land via mouths of the merchants. And Kerube, too, had likely been watching how things regarding Salonia’s lumber might unfold.

“I had first heard of how things are in Karlan from the lord of Tonneburg and his ranger. And it seems Karlan and Kerube have not been on the best of terms for quite a long time, and it doesn’t seem like Lord Tonneburg has built a very good relationship with Kerube, either.”

The hedged wording was Lawrence’s way of being considerate.

As Kieman’s surprise faded, what Lawrence told him seemed to settle in.

“The Lord of Tonneburg must think of us as bloodsucking leeches or something, doesn’t he?”

“Is Lord Tonneburg borrowing everything from the trading companies in this

city?”

There was a slight chance that he proudly said he was not borrowing anything from Karlan.

And who owed who was a very important detail at this stage.

“It is a debt from a long time ago, you see. There is nowhere else to borrow from in this area. And if that lord owed Karlan, then I doubt they would jointly decide to cut down the forest.”

Holo smiled wryly; they had been missing an important detail until now.

“Despite how he carries himself, he is a noble at heart,” she said.

It was clear from the way she said it that it was not a genuine compliment.

“Is he wrestling with a feeling of inferiority because of the unequal footing due to the debt?”

“We can call it a sense of repulsion that comes from an inferiority complex. He probably thinks, *Why must I be reserved when dealing with mere commoners?*”

Matthias had been rather magnanimous with Lawrence, but that was because he owed him nothing. He would not be the same with someone to whom he owed generations’ worth of debt. Especially not with one his family had been borrowing from for years, with whom he had a humiliating relationship.

“If he came to us, we would gladly talk to him about his debts and his problems with the Church. The lumber from that forest is valuable, after all. But I don’t think he wants us to appraise his forest like that. And I think he agreed to Karlan’s plan because they are on equal footing; Karlan, after all, can get the upper hand by using the lumber as a shield. In which case, anyone would treat him as a very important person. Particularly tempting for an undistinguished lord.”

Kieman shrugged, but Lawrence’s heart ached for the position Matthias had been forced to live in for many years. He was a good man; a great deal of self-restraint was necessary to preserve the forest that could fetch him mountains of gold with the snap of a finger.

“I think it is...right, in a way, that Karlan feels animosity toward us. They often have disputes with our merchants over suppliers, and the flow of goods in this area is most advantageous for us. They are hoping to change that flow by greatly lowering their taxes, however.”

Lawrence was not sure how much of what Kieman said he should accept at face value, but perhaps the relationship between Karlan and Kerube was a lot more like his own metaphor than he originally thought.

A bull in a porcelain shop.

Kerube must be hurting Karlan, but it was not out of malice. Their body was simply too big; they had no personal vendetta against the porcelain.

“Change location, and perspective changes drastically. You, Merchant Lawrence, should understand this.”

But Lawrence was forgetting his basics—he had taken so long to start a fire.

Lawrence cleared his throat and said, “Er, well, I came here to see what sort of picture Eve is really trying to paint. And it seems she has not given us the whole story. But she doesn’t seem to be as vicious as she used to be, so I’m not sure what to make of that.”

The details on Kerube, most notably, were elusive.

How had Eve taken Kerube by the scruff and kept them down?

When Lawrence said that, Kieman narrowed his eyes and pressed his lips into a thin line, as though telling him he was being ridiculous.

“That snake of a woman has only honed her viciousness.”

Lawrence could feel Holo hold her breath beside him.

“What’s worse is that it seems she’ll be stringing us up for a full-frontal attack.”

Lawrence glanced at Holo again. But Holo did not look at Lawrence; instead, her eyes glinted with dark curiosity, waiting for what Kieman would say next.

“She has woven herself such a precise plot, all to harass us.”

“Which means?”

Kieman flattened his wild bangs with a hand.

“Wool. She is going to string us up with her wool.”

Kieman suggested they change locations before continuing the conversation.

He said it would be easier to see the truth for themselves, because he knew it was his word up against Eve’s.

And so Lawrence, Holo, and Kieman walked the nighttime streets of Kerube; they passed a handful of people as they did, and a good percentage of them greeted Kieman, and the patrolling guards bowed politely.

Kieman brought them to a place near the town harbor.

“What is this?”

“The wool exchange.”

The tall brick wall vanished into the dark. It was a rather large place, and the walls were meant to protect the product within. Kieman spoke to the night guard, and they were let through the wooden gates, which led into a wide open courtyard—it was hard to imagine they were in the heart of a cramped city.

“Usually around this time of year, this building is stuffed full of all the wool sheared in the summer, making it look like a thick blanket of snow.”

Holo sniffed the air, drew up her shoulders as though chilly, and came to stand beside Lawrence. Perhaps all her sweat from the run from Karlan had cooled her down.

“And it’s because of that snake that it looks like this now.”

“You can’t get any wool?”

“That’s correct. I don’t know what sort of eye she has for this, but she stands out from the rest when it comes the wool trade. She’s even earned herself a spot as the Twilight Cardinal’s personal merchant, it seems. That means she commands great influence over the wool coming in from the kingdom. The wool merchants here on the mainland say you’ll fall ill if you put her in a bad mood.”

And what was it Eve was searching for in exchange of wool?

“She told us that if we want wool, we will have to lower the price of our lumber.”

Lawrence’s face froze taut halfway into a smile.

Eve had not taken Karlan’s side and was standing opposed to Kerube.

She was agitating Karlan by offering them glimpses of Kerube’s darkness all while intimidating Kerube with Karlan’s plans to expand.

“If we end up in conflict, we will have no choice but to make it cheap...”

The reason Holo could put on such airs of importance every day was because she commanded Lawrence’s attention alone.

Lawrence looked up to the night sky, fully visible, which was unusual for a city, and said, “If that were all, I would think this a common trade tactic, but...” Looking at Kieman, he could tell that was obviously not the case, so he added on a slight concession onto the end.

“You want to ask why we insist on wool? No, you want to know why we have to sell the lumber we get from Lenos to the kingdom for cheap, if that’s the case. Right?”

“Yes. Money seems to sprout from the literal woodwork these days.”

Anyone and everyone wanted lumber, to the point where Eve would resort to schemes.

“If this were just about selling lumber, then we wouldn’t mind where it ended up. But like you said, we have our own reasons.”

In seaside port towns like this, they could easily put their lumber on a ship and send it wherever they pleased if they did not like where they were currently selling it to. The reason Lenos could not do such a thing was because it was not practical to drag heavy lumber across the land.

But Kerube had their own reasons for needing to sell the lumber they purchased to the kingdom. And that likely had to do with access to their wool.

“Is there any need to obtain wool outside of trade?”

Nighttime along the sea was cold at this time of year. Holo hugged herself, so

Lawrence removed his coat and placed it over her shoulders.

“Wool is necessary to keep people warm,” Kieman said, idly looking at Holo with Lawrence’s warm jacket over her shoulders. “Through the hard work of the villagers over many years, and the deeds the Rowen Trade Guild have accomplished under my watch, Kerube has thrived. But the city has grown a bit too big as of late.”

Kieman looked out over the wool exchange; he was not the same shrewd merchant he was years ago.

“Even if the town itself develops nicely, there will always be a portion of the population that suffers for one reason or another. And there are people who drift in from elsewhere.”

Unlike Karlan, Kerube was a key location in traffic.

“Do you plan to warm them with wool?”

“Or something like it, yes. Those suffering come knock on this door and are given an armful of wool.”

At last, it clicked for Lawrence.

“Spinning thread.”

Kieman nodded, and Holo looked up curiously.

“Thread spinning does not cost much in terms of labor, and it is a job anyone can do. Anyone can start the very same day—no need to know how to read or write, or even speak the same language.”

All one needed to do was divide the wool, brush it out, make sure all the hairs were lined up, and then twist it into thread. All one needed to work efficiently was the right tools, with or without experience, and anyone could do the work as long as they had a place to sit and a brush.

“It was a lot like the wheat mixing job you did,” Lawrence said, and Holo finally understood.

Wheat brought in as trade goods was placed into storage, but if left alone, humidity would cause it to mold. It was necessary to mix the wheat to prevent this, but that work solely belonged to the women. Anyone could take on the

job, even without great strength or reliability, so it was a job reserved those who often found themselves in dire straits.

“Wool has a better margin when woven into thread, so everyone wins.”

Upon hearing that, Lawrence dropped his shoulders, tired.

Eve was most certainly taking a forward, aggressive stance, but the most important thing was that she was looking at Kerube’s footing and forcing them to lower the prices on lumber. With word that lumber, as price for her wool, could just as easily be obtained from Karlan.

And Lawrence noticed one more thing.

“Do you have plans to take in religious refugees here, too?”

Like a shopkeeper asked if new stock would be coming in the following week, Kieman smiled.

“Of course. We are allies of the Twilight Cardinal, after all.”

And Eve was Eve.

Everything she did was correct, following the principles of trade while also helping Col and Myuri, but when all the pieces were put together, everything was undeniably in her favor.

“I am starting to get a feel for how deep trade goes.”

There was no need for any of them to get crafty. If he had the wits about him to move readily when he saw his chance like Eve, then all he needed to was turn all of his right options into raw material.

And so what should they do while they were playing second fiddle to the wolf?

Lawrence said, to confirm his next steps, “We were on our way to Tonneburg in order to talk to its ruling lord, who is stubbornly standing his ground until the very end, so that Eve may continue with her plan. But we decided to change course and we’re visiting without sending official word.”

“I see. To be honest, I should string you up right now.”

It sounded like a joke, but Lawrence was not entirely sure how much of it was

a serious consideration.

“Our thinking was that if Eve was up to no good, then we would have to consider if this project should be abandoned for Lord Tonneburg’s sake. That’s what we’ve come to confirm.”

Eve was greedy, but she was not evil.

But it was hard to call her actions just, so Lawrence hesitated.

“I cannot allow that snake of a woman to hog all the profits for herself.”

That could have been interpreted as Kieman’s personal stance, since he apparently saw Eve as a business rival, but there was a pragmatic meaning behind it as well.

That was because there were only so many profits to be made, and all of those profits would be coming from lumber.

And since that lumber would be coming from the Tonneburg Woods, it would ultimately be fastest to whittle away at Eve’s profits if they wanted to save the forest.

“But what is your aim, then?” Kieman asked. “My thoughts are...I don’t see you making any large profits after you make all your visits. If you want to discreetly support the Twilight Cardinal, then the outcome is largely the same, whether you get involved or not.”

Regardless, the refugees would find homes in Karlan or Kerube. Each town needed to take responsibility and put their own minds together to properly prepare for them.

Lawrence’s first consideration, of course, was to protect the Tonneburg Woods for Holo’s sake, of course, but Kieman did not know what Holo truly was; he would not understand.

If he wanted to make sure Eve earned less than she had planned, then he would need to work with Kieman.

Lawrence then decided to rely on a little trick in order to earn Kieman’s trust.

“You know what I learned—the forest’s true value is in its underbrush, which serves as feed to fatten the livestock.”

Kieman's brows raised as he turned to look at Lawrence.

"I hear it's a commodity that never finds its way to market shelves. The wheat yield depends heavily on the amount of livestock manure that has reached the fields, and if Tonneburg's forest were to fall to ruin, then it would affect a surprisingly large portion of the wheat harvest."

All markets were connected in one way or another; if one market changed its prices, then that would cause ripples. There was quite a distance between Kerube and the Tonneburg Woods, and the wheat fields this area relied on were not the same ones that fed Salonia. But if the wheat crop were to fail in the area around Salonia, then it would doubtlessly affect Kerube, too.

With that exposition out of the way, Lawrence continued.

"Also, did you hear about what happened in Salonia?"

"Salonia?"

"I stopped the lumber merchants from lowering tariffs for the Church's sake. And as a reward, I'll be receiving a portion of the wheat harvest as tribute."

Of course, that was nothing more than a courtesy from a plot of land no wider than the length of his arm span.

But it still was the truth, and it was likely that Kieman had already heard pieces of the affair. He nodded deeply.

In his view, he was starting to see what Lawrence sought to gain by protecting his interests in the wheat harvest.

"And so to tell you the truth, I don't actually want to talk to Lord Tonneburg, since it will affect the harvest. But as of present, Tonneburg itself is at risk of disappearing completely due to debt and suspicion of heresy. I suppose his decision is that this is better than losing everything."

Upon hearing Lawrence's explanation, Kieman shrugged, satisfied.

Lawrence continued, pressuring him further.

"When I heard the outline of Eve's project, I thought Karlan—a port city struggling to develop further—was putting together a revitalization plan with Lord Tonneburg. And the one they were working with just so happened to be

Eve.”

“And that makes us, Kerube, the villains in this situation.”

Lawrence nodded. “But Kerube’s evil shadow is meant to intimidate Karlan and Lord Tonneburg into coming together.”

All that about the rival city Kerube was *supposed* to be groundless. By mildly voicing her apprehensions and not putting in an ounce of extra work, she painted Kerube as a greedy wolf frightening the poor little piglets.

“In our case,” Kieman started—as any seasoned merchant could do, he could speak and think at the same time. After a pause, he continued, “We want to avoid her one-sided requests at all costs. She always finds the choicest parts of any particular opportunity, trying to get her hands on excessive profit while basking in everyone’s praise and gratitude.”

All he needed to do was picture what would happen once Eve’s project came to fruition. Karlan would be able to expand their range of trade, and Matthias would be able to pay off his debts while receiving protection from the Twilight Cardinal, even solving their problems of faith. And from the perspective of Col and Myuri, those suffering as a direct result of their actions would be saved by Eve’s work. That was because Eve would use the lumber to build houses, provide fuel for heating, and create the ships that would carry refugees to the kingdom.

On the other hand, if Kerube agreed to lower the price of lumber as requested, they would be able to safely obtain the wool that provided work for the needy as they always had.

In terms of losses and profits, Kerube might seem to be the only loser, but Karlan and Tonneburg’s actual situations would not change much.

Karlan was trying to grow, but it was only a little port town as of now. There was no telling if they could support all the refugees they wanted to take in, yet they were doing just that on the assumption that the town *would* develop. All while recklessly doing away with their tariffs. Tonneburg, of course, was burdened by the danger of the impending disappearance of their forest, and so they decided to sell off lumber, ready to raise more smithies and coal-burning huts as well. They were facing their own challenges.

Eve alone made no risky bets, bore no burden of danger, and only used her wool as a bargaining chip to secure lumber, even earning herself a reputation for lending Col a hand.

None of this was foul play, of course.

Eve perfectly played the part of a benevolent merchant.

“But listen, dear,” Holo said, clasping Lawrence’s coat tighter around her, taking in its scent. “*Should* we foil her plans? It may be unfair, but there are a number she is helping by doing so, no? I see no reason to go out of our way to trouble them.”

Eve was not trying to cause another’s downfall. Karlan, Tonneburg, Kerube, and the refugees that could no longer stay in their homes, were all technically gaining something from this project.

But Eve’s profits were almost too good. It felt unfair.

And Lawrence had the words to express the unfairness.

“It’s a fundamental principle of trade.”

“Hmm?”

“Reward is the price for risk. Eve is, in that regard, safer than any other player on the field, and earns *too* much from this. Of course there should be concessions.”

“I hate to acknowledge that I’m losing out, but if she were to list all her profits, then it would be easier on everyone.”

Tonneburg would be more prominent. If Eve lowered the price of wool, then the amount of lumber offered would dwindle, and the effects on the forest would lessen. If Karlan made even more money with the cheap wool, then it would be easier for them to secure the funds to help the refugees coming into the city. That would be the same as Kerube: If they were able to avoid the harrowing cuts to lumber prices, then they would be able to secure that much more wool and fill this empty wool exchange.

“And so if there is one thing we might be able to get Eve on...”

As Lawrence added the sights of Kerube into his mental map, he examined

the path Eve took to get here.

“...it’s her connection with Col.”

It was an extremely powerful weapon that she had in her arsenal. With the backing of the Twilight Cardinal, everyone else danced to her tune.

The Twilight Cardinal, however, was receiving great sympathy for his causes worldwide; in Eve’s case, that meant the responsibility of upholding his just ideals.

“We might be able to manage something if we point out to her that she is making *too* much profit. Does Kerube’s council have any sway in the Kingdom of Winfiel at all?” Lawrence asked.

Kieman frowned. “That is also complicated. We are told that if we are to join the Twilight Cardinal’s cause, then we will benefit from it later, and it’s not unusual to buy products from the kingdom at a high price now.”

“What?”

“The Twilight Cardinal resides in the Kingdom of Winfiel. Buying their goods is a way of supporting their reformation of the greedy Church. It’s a donation, in a way. It’s regarded as a symbol of doing good, and their goods are much sought after.”

Though it might not have been a part of Col’s intentions, Lawrence was aware that the world could be shallow. Merchants, especially, were the type to squeeze profit out of a situation like this.

Eve had a firm grasp on how the people felt and was leveraging her position for all it was worth.

“The city council does not want to oppose that snake of a woman. No matter how many times I find myself livid over her ways, or how many times help for the impoverished is delayed because of the depleted wool, the council only shrugs their shoulders. It’s almost as though they’re trying to get rid of the knots and stress from the whole incident surrounding the narwhal.”

No one thought Eve would become such a big player in this game. Those who remembered how she once acted would be beside themselves with fear.

On the other hand, Lawrence took note of a surprising fact from the way Kieman spoke.

“Are you in charge of the city’s assistance programs in the council?” Lawrence asked.

Like a child trying their best to put up a brave face after someone touches their frostbitten skin, Kieman gave a lopsided smile.

“I looked into the narwhal situation in my own way and vowed to do better. That was how I came to understand the importance of the beggars’ information network.”

It took Lawrence a few moments to understand.

Col had once pretended to be a wandering student and had collected all sorts of valuable information from the city’s beggars.

“I at first thought about it in terms of loss and profits, knowing I needed to deepen my ties with them.”

But it was likely that as he associated with them, he came to understand their circumstances, could no longer ignore them, and wanted to help them, though uncharacteristic of him as it was.

Their disposition, their desire to be seen as cold and intelligent merchants—Eve was much the same—was strangely quaint to Lawrence, who had taken a step away from that way of life.

Perhaps the reason Kieman was so infuriated with Eve’s methods was that because they were similar.

“If you were evil, or if you figured out that Eve was putting together a corrupt plan, then I would have been able to rest a bit easier,” Lawrence said.

Kieman laughed. “I agree. But all those getting caught up in her project are only trying to get a handle on what they need. She’s manipulated that and made it a part of her own schemes.”

Perhaps even all the things that prevented Karlan from developing until now were understandable reasons, if taking into consideration what the lords who managed the river checkpoints and those who oversaw the land of the roads

had to say.

“So... If we have to end up going along with Eve’s intentions, and if there is any sort of favor I could ask of you,” Kieman paused, before continuing lightly. “Could you speak with Col and tell him that the fur from Lenos is perfect for protecting oneself from evil beliefs when worn?”

Fur and lumber traveled down the Roef River from Lenos to arrive in Kerube.

If the price of fur were to go up, then they could make up for the reduced price of lumber and still purchase the wool they needed.

But profiting off faith was the biggest reason why Col was fighting with the Church.

“...We have to take you up on your proposal, since you helped us when your bathhouse ran into trouble.”

Kieman chuckled.

Lawrence said to him, “What we are most interested in is the Tonneburg Woods. Can we expect that the growth in trade that Karlan is planning for after the forest is cut down is not a temporary thing?”

This question would not earn Lawrence a solid answer if Kerube was indeed trying to quash Karlan’s project.

But now that Lawrence understood where Kerube and Kieman stood, he could expect a more meaningful response.

“From what I gather, the plan is to build a road through the forest, then set up smithies and coal-burning huts. Is this correct?”

“Yes,” Kieman replied, his sharp merchant’s eyes resting on the dark of the wool exchange.

He continued, “They will profit from the lumber extracted from the forest. But what would building a road through the place earn us? What sits at the end of that path is our trade territory. The only competing product I can think of is the wool we would obtain from that crafty woman. Kerube and Karlan are similar. Trading the same loaves of bread will not help fill our bellies.”

Holo immediately huffed in what sounded like a sneeze.

Lawrence thought it was funny that he used the exact same metaphor. He had probably heard that very metaphor somewhere, from someone in his old trade guild.

“I see.”

“Yes. That is reasonable in trade.”

And if they had no choice but to rely on the extracted lumber, then could they discreetly get Tanya’s help to keep the Tonneburg Woods alive?

Holo said that building a road through it would change the nature of the forest drastically.

They would create charcoal in the burning huts, use it for fuel at new smithies, and ship lumber through Karlan and onward to the kingdom. Kieman was not thinking about how those profits meant all the lumber from the forest would serve as the foundation for the roads, and that the new road would bring about even more profit.

And there was nothing about that that could lead one to reasonably believe that Kerube had any reason to get in the way of Karlan’s trade. They dealt in the same goods, so the merchants naturally decided there was no real reason for them to use Karlan.

They could have managed something if Kerube was evil. But if they were not intentionally sabotaging the project, then there was nothing they could do.

“Logically speaking, we could make moderate use of the forest, Karlan could expand their trade, and Kerube should be able to obtain wool as you always have,” Lawrence said, feeling as though he was being shown a painting of a staircase that continued forever upward.

“Yes. If we manage to lessen the profits of that snake, and make sure she isn’t the only winner, then we could reduce the amount of lumber we plan to sell and protect the forest. Then both Karlan and our Kerube will be able to grow.”

But they could not find a way to accomplish that. Because all Eve was doing was adding to her list of right moves.

What little hope they had could only be found if all the losers here found a

way to work together.

“Still, after all this thinking, the principles of trade block our path.”

“That’s your weakness, Lawrence. What happened to the show you put on in Salonia?”

His teasing tone reminded Lawrence of how Kieman used to be.

“That was less about my knowledge and more that as an outsider—I saw things that others couldn’t.”

Kieman nodded, and Lawrence continued.

“Let’s ignore the tie between Eve and Col for now. If she were actively using him for vicious purposes, then we could contact Col directly and have him stop her... But indirectly, it seems like she is using him deftly while acting thankful for no real good reason.”

Kieman nodded, vexed, and said, “If only we had a product that could match the wool.”

In the end, their weakness was being taken advantage of. But since Eve was deftly weaving together an honest deal, that meant she could not reject them for fighting back with honest means.

That said, if there was any product that could compete with lumber, all Lawrence could really come up with was to use Col’s fame and have favorable words written on leather. And that itself was a method so underhanded and shameful that not even Eve would attempt it.

“Can you think of something, dear?”

Holo’s tone made it sound as though she was asking what was for dinner, but Lawrence decided to take it as her honest expectation. And while Lawrence could be considered lucky, he was fundamentally a regular merchant, and technically not even a merchant anymore.

“If I could come up with anything on the spot, I’d be a great merchant in no time.”

This was after Kieman had doubtlessly racked his brains; there was no reason to believe that Karlan or Matthias had not done the same. Lawrence did not

consider himself special enough to come up with an idea after so many people from all over had thought long and hard about it already.

“Ohhh... But how *frustrating* this is.”

Lawrence knew how Holo felt. Ostensibly, nothing was wrong with the situation, yet they could not shake the feeling that it *was*.

“Ah, yes! The two cities are not on terrible terms like we first thought. Can these people not lend a hand with regards to the forest family’s debt? If so, then the forest does not have to be sold, no? That would mean lumber must be bought from this city, and this place will soon fill with wool. That settles it, does it not?”

Holo gestured to Kieman and the area around him, and Kieman simply shrugged.

Lawrence answered on his behalf.

“That would solve the problems for Tonneburg and Kerube, but not Karlan. Karlan would lose its access to lumber, which is key to its trade expansion, and that means they wouldn’t be able to get wool anymore. But I guess we don’t *have* to help them...”

But Lawrence recalled how lively it was at the tavern. The optimism in the building was shocking, and it made his old merchant heart flutter.

And without cutting down the Tonneburg Woods, the refugees who came to Karlan for the express purpose of working construction would have nothing to do.

“Hngh...”

Holo seemed scarily close to stomping in frustration.

Benefitting one party would cause another to lose out. Saving any two of Karlan, Tonneburg, or Kerube would cause the third to sink.

And it was Eve who had miraculously built a temple out of all the same materials—she sat upon its roof and sipped her wine, laughing all the way.

Kieman then said, “Let’s return to the trading house. It seems you don’t have much time left, but I think we’ll be able to think better there.”

Holo may have forgotten about the cold in her anger, but they could easily fall ill standing here in the nighttime autumn breeze.

“How much time do you think you have until that snake of a woman figures out what you’ve been up to?”

Lawrence had used the excuse that he was going to talk to Matthias to leave Karlan, and come here.

“We will have to leave before...dawn, tomorrow.”

Kieman nodded. He smoothed down his bangs.

“I used to spend all night coming up with trade deals.”

No one was particularly at fault in this situation.

But Eve’s laughter echoed around them, and being forced to dance to her tune was most certainly vexing.

“Things are the opposite from last time,” Kieman said.

“Let’s try to resolve things peacefully this time,” Lawrence replied.

The men shared wry, merchant-like smiles, and Holo alone, who was not quite part of this, seemed dissatisfied.

The errand boy rushed over with a map of the area and trade contracts that the trade house had a grasp on. When counting all the little things, there were a great number of goods being exchanged, and when they were all put together, it became a whole torrent of commerce.

Kieman was thinking hard to find ways to not get tangled up in all this, now that he understood Eve’s intentions, but it did not seem to be going well. But now Lawrence had appeared, and if it was always the news from travelers that could quickly change the business of a relaxed market, then it was much too early to give up on reaching a breakthrough.

“It’d be nice if we could quickly whip together all the things that the Winfiel Kingdom needs.”

“The one time that snake of a woman puts together an honest trade. It shouldn’t be easy for her to choose not to sell wool if she doesn’t get her

lumber.”

This time around, Eve’s strength and weakness was her connection to the honest and upright Twilight Cardinal.

If Eve was doing something villainous, then they could threaten her with Col’s tears.

That would make Lawrence himself a villainous merchant, which meant he could technically reach out to Col and give them orders, and ruin Eve’s trade all they liked, but he could not.

When he pictured the cold stare not only from Col, but from his only daughter Myuri, he had a hard time breathing.

“I know you must have thoroughly looked into the possibility, but why not leather?”

Leather came down the river from Lenos to Kerube along with lumber. They could also easily procure leather, because of the hunting at Bishop Rahden’s village, who they met in Salonia, and the mountain Tanya revived. And if they could hunt deer in the Tonneburg Woods on top of that, then that would then reduce the amount of woodland creatures feasting on leaf buds, and it would prevent the woods from becoming a conifer forest. It took care of two birds with one stone.

“The kingdom is the Twilight Cardinal’s base. Leather is considered a luxury article and does not actually sell very well there.”

“Ah, I see.”

Now that he thought about it, he had heard something similar in Karlan. The southern merchants who dealt in spices were no longer able to sell to the indulgent Church clergy, and now had no choice but to seek out smaller towns like Karlan. Karlan was fighting to make this a business opportunity, but Col’s actions were having unintended effects all over the world.

“We might be able to do something with woolen goods, however.”

“Woolen goods?”

Lawrence began rifling through the mountain of documents; he had a feeling

he had just seen a contract about woolen goods.

But what he found was the trade of wool as a raw material, and thread at most. The wool would have to go through several other stages of production to become woolen goods.

“The wool comes from across the sea, is woven into thread here, then immediately shipped back across and sold there... That can’t be easy.”

Thread could be spun anywhere.

“We could at least treat it as goods if we could turn it into semifinished cloth.”

Lawrence looked at Holo when he heard that because she was dozing off after having run at full speed all the way to Kerube, and there was a blanket draped over her.

“Do you not have enough weavers?”

“Every city knows that profits would greatly increase if they could sell wool as fabric, and not just wool, so they want to produce woolen goods. But scarcely does it ever move past thread spinning. Sometimes the ash necessary to remove the oils from the fibers is not available, or they do not have the facilities for fulling or dyeing.”

Several processes were necessary in order to turn wool into fabric. From what Lawrence learned once upon a time, it was common for it to take two to three years to go from sheared wool to being sold as clothing.

“The trickiest part is the lack of water. That is the same reason Winfiel exports unprocessed wool.”

Lawrence knew that dyeing the fabric used up water. But fulling, however, required him to flip through the account books in his mind.

“Fulling... Yes, waterwheels.”

“This area has many wheat fields. The biggest rivers are full of boats, and the smaller creeks will have a mill, and that’s that. And most importantly, large tracts of land suited for wheat are typically flat to begin with. Rivers on land like that often are not powerful enough to properly full the fabric flat.”

The document Lawrence found noted that raw wool and thread were often

sent inland, toward mountains.

“But gentler rivers do not require as much work in order to travel upstream, so the merchants that come to Kerube to sell leather stock up on thread and wool before going back upstream. There, where the flow of the river is stronger, they turn the thread into fabric, full it, dye it, and then come back down the river.”

And plenty of taxes and fees had to be paid during this process, including paying those who would take on the transport of the fabric, and thus profits fell drastically. Yet there was an industrial reason why that had to happen.

“Well, that’s why things would be much easier if gold came from the Tonneburg Woods.”

If so, then Matthias could hand gold over to Karlan instead of lumber, Karlan could then purchase wool and keep the economy going without wasting lumber, and Eve, no longer able to obtain lumber from Karlan, would then have to buy from Kerube as she always did.

“Mm... If only we could find a narwhal...,” Holo muttered; she was just scarcely paying attention as she dozed, it seemed.

“All in all, this situation is much like that.”

Everyone was trying to find new profits in this mess—it felt a lot like the divine creating something from nothing.

“Hmm... If we can’t come up with new products, then is there a chance there’s something in the tension between Karlan and Kerube that Eve hasn’t thought of yet? Something akin to political warfare.”

All they really had to do was drag Eve’s profits down.

That alone would lessen the burden on Karlan, Tonneburg, and Kerube, and it would be easier for all three parties to create brighter futures for themselves.

“There must be a way for everyone to work together. But I think our only choice is to come together and negotiate with the snake. But then we would probably end up arguing over the allotment of our shares. I think it would be more difficult to cooperate with Karlan than it would be to simply obstruct

them.”

Kieman, who knew the reality of running a large port town, gave a tired smile. Their histories and sizes were on vastly different scales, so it was almost impossible for them to stand on equal ground, and even if they were to allot the profits based on number of people alone, the value of a great trade corporation versus a small alliance of merchants fetched different values, even if their numbers were the same.

Maintaining face was truly a troublesome concept.

Lawrence and Kieman then lit candle after candle and pondered all night long, but could find no particular standout strategy. They did consider widening the scope and getting Salonia and the Debau Company involved, but that failed to provide a better solution.

They were tired, and their time limit was looming.

Though it was still dark outside, and dawn showed no signs of breaking, Holo woke up as the morning church bell, meant to awaken the clergy, rang before even the first bird awoke.

“Yawn... Ah, dear?”

“Mm-hmm?”

Just as Kieman returned from washing his face in the well, he saw Holo folding the blanket, and his shoulders dropped.

“It seems like you have no choice but to go on and pretend like you’re going to speak to Lord Tonneburg, Lawrence.”

“I’ll do what I can to delay this, too.”

Matthias was not interested in joining the project, but he was a smart leader—he understood that his options were limited. Once he saw Lawrence, he would likely agree to the contract and head to Karlan without showing much resistance. Eve was surely confident in her own strategy, so if Lawrence had trouble with his talk, then Matthias would probably start doubting him.

Eve was not only simply making money out of this project. She was also creating a new place for refugees to work and make new homes, so it was hard

to call this extension justified.

“Are you heading out by horse?”

“There’s no way to tell for certain that Eve’s lookouts won’t be in or around Kerube, so we’ll be leaving from outside the city.”

Kieman was satisfied with that. Kerube was a large city, which meant there was a sprawl of smaller towns just beyond the city walls—there were plenty of stables there.

“*Sigh*... Even if we don’t get any results, we could have stood our ground for just a little longer, if this was like the old days.”

Kieman rolled his neck, a hint of pain in the act; Lawrence was the same. He genuinely wondered if he might fall off Holo on the way.

“What do you think the secret is to Eve’s youth?” Lawrence asked.

Kieman gave it a moment of serious thought and said, “Her greed, I think.”

Holo did not ask if Lawrence had made any progress, and Lawrence got the sense that she was not running at top speed.

She could also tell that he was nodding off, so she deliberately landed hard on the ground with each step, keeping him awake.

She offered to carry him in her mouth, but he refused, so he fought off his drowsiness as best he could.

But he had his limits. Once the sky in the east started growing lighter, a warmth greater than that of the sun began to melt into his consciousness, and he almost fell from Holo’s back.

Many a time did Holo glance back to look at him, but nothing helped. She eventually dropped her speed, found a spot blocking the view from the road with hills and sparse copses, and let Lawrence down.

Slightly vexed, she lay on her stomach, poked Lawrence with her nose, drew him closer with her tail, and became his very own bed of fur.

She did not call him a fool. And she understood how sad that made him by the way he wilted.

When they first met, Lawrence did not stop for anything, even when he had gotten stabbed after running around underground catacombs.

Even though back then he could have kept fighting until his dying breath, now the strength in his hands waned, and it was a fight to summon what energy he did have.

As Lawrence sat within Holo's fur and her sunlike warmth, he thought.

I think it will feel like this when I die.

Wait, I'm not actually dying, am I? came the unwitting question, and he opened his eyes.

It was then that Holo drew her red eyes away from the breaking dawn and to him.

"Sleep."

It had always been Lawrence's job in their travels to look after their well-being. But when Holo was like this, she most certainly earned her moniker as the Wisewolf.

Perhaps the reason Holo drank herself silly so often was so that they rarely had to switch their roles.

It was always Lawrence who marched forward in high spirits, dragging Holo along behind him.

They had not switched places; Holo was not looking back at Lawrence, paused in his tracks.

"..."

Lawrence mumbled something, something not even he understood, and Holo narrowed her eyes curiously.

He mustered all he could to speak as he pried his eyelids open, falling shut as he succumbed to drowsiness.



“We’re not...done...”

Holo did not ask with what.

Her lips parted to show her rows of teeth, and she rubbed the side of her nose against Lawrence’s shoulder, as though giving a dry laugh.

And after staring at him for a moment, she turned her gaze into the distance again.

The dazzling sunlight made the ground seem like golden fields of wheat; countless times had she greeted the morning with a sight like this before.

Lawrence had never been there, of course, but he felt like he had seen the sun rise over wheat many, many times in his life. That sensation most certainly came from when, after they had arrived in the hot spring village of Nyohhira, he found himself nuzzled among Holo’s fur, absorbing her warmth as they slept outside.

It was then, as Nyohhira’s bathhouse owners ridiculed them for even entertaining the thought of finding new springs, Holo scoffed and began searching the area, as though looking for a bone she had buried earlier. As she dug with such enthusiasm that Lawrence worried she might change the shape of the mountain entirely, she finally found a spring.

There Lawrence built a bathhouse, there they welcomed their only daughter, and there the boy they had collected on their journey grew into a fine young man. That was where, he knew, his bones would be laid to rest.

Holo might get fidgety over the scent of bones like a dog at times, but he would be perfectly happy if she chewed on his bones.

As those thoughts crossed his mind, he found himself grinning on the edge of reverie.

“Dear.”

Perhaps the reason Holo spoke to him to wake him up because she found that little smile of his revolting.

Though that was the thought that initially crossed his mind, he saw that when he squinted in the bright sunlight that the sun had completely cleared the

horizon. He had slept longer than he thought; they would have to leave soon.

“I want to take a bath,” Lawrence muttered.

Holo frowned, deeply. It was as though she was reprimanding him for voicing that when *she* had worked so hard to keep the same sentiment to herself.

He wondered if they could dig up springs in Tonneburg, too. They had been told that springs appeared with surprising frequency in the plains, so perhaps it was more likely than gold. And when he put that thought together with the map he found in Salonia, then the possibility was—

“What?!”

He jolted upright, and not because Holo had nipped at his head.

Holo’s eyes went wide at Lawrence’s sudden movement, and she craned her head to look at him.

Lawrence looked around, then eventually met Holo’s gaze. Fragments of his memory swirled together like a tempest in his mind. It was in that moment that he suddenly realized he had a treasure map right in the palm of his hands.

Like a drunkard who suddenly sobered and was looking in his wallet, he felt around her front legs.

He eventually found her giant paw.

When they had first met, Lawrence had been paralyzed in shock when he saw her claws.

He wondered when it stopped scaring him. It felt like it was a very long time ago—not long after they started traveling together.

When he brushed her claws, Holo curled her paw in discomfort.

Lawrence looked up at her.

“You were more than willing to use your wolf powers this time, right?”

Her large ears pricked, and her large head whipped to look at him; it was an act powerful enough to create its own wind.

“What did you see in your dreams?”

Lawrence held his breath, adding everything they had gone through since their time in Salonia to his mental map. Behind Eve's morality hid vast profits.

But it was not only people who hid things.

The earth, too, occasionally hid the flow of time.

"Eve is trying to string everyone up with her wool by being up front and above board."

Holo sensed something in Lawrence's tone; her eyes, as she looked at him, glinted strongly in the sunlight.

"Then why don't we resort to...something more underhanded?"

Holo blinked once, twice, and her tail whipped through the air.

The sun began to rise even higher, signaling the start of a new day.

"I love it when you make that face."

She rubbed her snout affectionately against his face, strong enough to knock him over; and as he burrowed into the fur on her stomach, he began to chart his plot. Though it was all firmly within the realm of possibility, Lawrence was confident, and he filled Holo in.

This had all started because of what happened in Salonia.

And since it had started in Salonia, the key to its end lay in Salonia, too.

"Yes."

Holo's eyes glinted in anticipation.

"Yeah."

Lawrence could picture Eve's shock already.

All they needed to do was collect their treasure-hunting party.

Once they retrieved the horse they had left behind, Lawrence and Holo headed for Tonneburg.

They passed into the western part of the forest just after noon; Holo ventured into the trees alone as a wolf to look into all the things she had heard from Lawrence.

Now on his own, Lawrence followed the road he remembered seeing on the map he borrowed from the old priest, but people rarely ever used it; it was in disrepair, and he had to ultimately dismount from his horse and walk.

“I should have just gone in the forest with Holo,” Lawrence said to the horse, and he thought he saw the horse frown in response to Holo’s name. It was probably sick of the wolf’s scent after having her fur tied to its mane the whole night. Lawrence could not help but smile.

After taking a roundabout way through the woods, the sun began to set.

He had walked the whole way on little sleep, so his relief was immeasurable when he saw the large pond in the distance.

On the priest’s map, the lord’s manor should have sat on the edge of this pond—big enough to be called a lake.

There were a few other houses in the area, not enough for it to be called a village, and waterways filled to the brim with water extended in all directions—those waterways fed not wheat, but vegetables. On the way from the checkpoint in which they met Meyer to Tonneburg, they had encountered more and more water as they got closer to the forest, and plenty of those bridges crossing over them had been in sorry states. The reason Tonneburg had managed to keep the forest intact was the natural keystone that was the marshy terrain.

All the roads and fields here sat on uneven ground, and the closer he got to the waterways that led to the lake, he could see the water spread below him. There was a small pier built onto the pond, and two equally small boats were docked there.

If he were to walk here early in the morning, amid the humidity, he would surely lose track of what was a field and what was water in the mist.

The state of the land brought him confidence.

Travelers did not understand the circumstances of the land, and traveling merchants were often in a disadvantageous position when it came to information, but there were times when an outsider could see things with clearer eyes—Salonia was one such case.

And this time was no different.

The way the map had been put together on the parchment caught Lawrence's eyes. Of course, Matthias, the Karlan merchants, Eve, and even Kieman had looked at that map countless times and used every ounce of knowledge they had to plan their moves.

And though he knew he could not be smarter or outmaneuver them by looking at the very same thing, Lawrence had one advantage.

Specifically, it was what had happened in Salonia.

Parchment was expensive, and so it was not uncommon to chip away at what was already written with a knife to rewrite something. One could then see what used to be written on the page by looking at its backside. When he had been involved with the lumber merchants, the very instance that had started this whole mess, he had realized what had been written beneath the map. Just like this.

That was the memory of ancient land—something modern merchants never once looked at, something Eve and Kieman had no way of knowing.

And it was here that he compared it to his memories of the journey only he and Holo shared.

How had he and Holo found a new spring, something everyone said was impossible, all to build a new bathhouse in the hot spring village of Nyohhira?

When he placed these maps together, he saw the lay of Tonneburg change.

Two towns, brothers snatching pieces of bread from each other, could be brought together in one trading area beneath the great flow of trade.

And it was the Tonneburg Woods that acted as the key to bringing them together—to be more precise, the ancient memory that still remained among the trees.

“Sir Lawrence?”

As Lawrence stood on the path, gazing out over the pond and the lord's house, he suddenly heard his name.

He looked to see Matthias, on horseback, accompanied by his attendants.

“My lord.” Lawrence moved to kneel, but Matthias raised a hand to stop him.

“How did things go in Karlan?”

Matthias dismounted, left his horse to his attendants, and motioned for Lawrence to walk with him.

Lawrence looked at Matthias and his horse’s feet to see they were all covered in mud—they must have been in the forest.

Perhaps it was his way of saying his final farewells, to burn the image of the lush forest into his mind.

“Eve Bolan, the representative from the Winfiel Kingdom, can be trusted.”

Matthias did not doubt the veracity of the report, but he did seem somewhat discouraged by the news.

Though he knew Karlan’s project would save his territory, a part of him wanted Eve to be such a bad person that they had no choice but to discard the project entirely.

It was wrong for him to hope so, but he knew that he could not both protect the forest and keep his land running.

And so Matthias had placed his hopes on keeping the territory up and running for the sake of his people.

“...I see. Well done,” Matthias said, swallowing Lawrence’s report and letting it settle in his stomach.

Upon seeing his reaction, Lawrence felt relieved he turned down the landowning nobility rights in Salonia. With less to protect, there were fewer troubles he needed to go through in order to safekeep what was most important.

He watched Matthias, sympathy filling his heart as he watched the man order his entourage to rush to the manor and begin preparations for him to sign the contract.

But it was in that moment when far in the distance, a flock of birds took to the sky from the trees.

It was as though the forest itself had been ejected into the sky; a few moments after Matthias's head whipped to look in that direction, there came a shock wave that rattled their ears. A great howl ensued, like the forest itself was crying out, and the wind blasted over Lawrence and Matthias; the surface of the water rippled. All living things were shaken to their core.

The enormity of it all was sudden, as was its disappearance. Once it passed, it felt like a daydream. Matthias seemed unsure if this was reality and stared out in shock into the trees. The only one calm was Lawrence.

No—perhaps he was excited.

Because he knew that howl was a sign from Holo.

“My lord,” Lawrence said, and Matthias jumped as he turned to look at him. “Eve Bolan saw how rich this forest was and had drawn up a plan for herself. That in itself is not an unjust profit, but she is profiting a bit *too* much from this.”

Matthias looked to Lawrence, perplexed, then turned an uneasy gaze out toward the forest, then back to Lawrence.

“What do you mean?”

“The reason you decided to join in on Karlan's plan was because you were thinking of your relationship with the Church, your debt, and about better lives for your subjects.”

Matthias did not want to cut down the forest for simple personal gain.

“But you are running the risk of losing your forest because of it. And one can say the same thing to Karlan as well.”

Though he did not explicitly say that Eve was taking advantage of him, that was how Matthias took it.

That was because he had that indistinct feeling to begin with, and yet he felt ashamed that he could not approach the situation with greater tenacity.

“Why do you feel the need to point this out *now*, Sir Lawrence?” Matthias asked, his expression tired.

This was the way of the world, and they had no choice but to obey it.

But Lawrence felt rather strongly about pushing aside the ways of the world.

“What would you say if there was something within this forest you could sell for a very pretty penny?”

Kieman had joked about there being gold veins in the ground.

Gold itself was a reach, but there had indeed been a map that pointed to treasure.

No one had been able to find it, so outsiders had found it in outside towns.

“My lord, do you know where I hail from?”

Matthias faltered in the face of Lawrence’s sudden question and his merchant’s smile.

But the reason he could not look away was because he saw the odd glint of confidence in his eyes.

“You are...” Matthias gulped. “...You are from Nyohhira.”

“Correct. I run a bathhouse in a hot spring village. That is because I struck upon a spring.”

Still bewildered, Matthias furrowed his brow and pursed his lips.

“Plus old maps,” Lawrence said, gesturing to the expanse of the pond beside them. “What did this pond used to connect to? And what about now? In another life, the answer to those questions would’ve granted me the right to walk shoulder to shoulder with you, my lord.”

There was the legend of the great serpent, which was said to have laid across the Salonia plains.

When Holo had gazed upon the wheat fields from atop the tower, she had been genuinely shocked to see the remains of the serpent. The way Matthias looked now was a lot like her in that moment.

“Subterranean...water?” Matthias murmured and brought a hand to his mouth. “No. We do not struggle with water here—well, in some ways, we do. Digging up water would not...”

“Water alone? Perhaps not.”

Because this water was different from hot springs. The great serpent, chased underground by the hero, had left behind traces of its existence by way of groundwater, which seeped up here and there. Simply digging up those traces would not immediately gain one gold, no, but all Lawrence had to do was think one step further and consider what Kieman said.

The flow of water was just as valuable.

“Collect the remnants of springwater that bubble through the earth from the remains of the river that once flowed through here. Create a waterway, and make a waterwheel from Tonneburg lumber. And luckily, this land is hillier than the rest of the land around it, which makes it ideal for a waterwheel.”

The wrinkles in Matthias’s frown grew deeper—he was slowly beginning to see the reality of the problem.

“A waterwheel? You want us to levy taxes on grain milling? No—” Matthias shook his head and turned his attention toward the trees. “—for ironmaking? Are you asking us to expand on the smithy to the point we need a waterwheel, then? No, you’re not. You are...for some reason, siding with the trees.”

Kieman likely believed Lawrence’s excuse that he wanted to protect the forest so that he might preserve the right he had to wheat, something he obtained in Salonia.

But Matthias was no merchant. His roots were in the forest.

He understood that Lawrence and Holo held deep sympathy for the woods that was not connected to pure profit.

“Yes, we are. And that is why it would not be for milling, much less the expansion of your smithies. There are ways to use waterwheels that more closely suit the forest.” Lawrence grasped at his own clothes. “Fulling wool. You could make fabric here and sell it. You have a master smith here, which means it will be easy to get the needed ash. You should be able to undertake the entirety of the process right here, from raw wool to the finished product.”

Matthias stared blankly in shock at him.

“There is no need to rush and cut down all of your precious trees, or waste your time building a road among them. Spinning wool into thread, turning it

into fabric, and making it into clothes is a special privilege only lands with bountiful water have. And the best part..." Lawrence paused. "...you would be working alongside your old enemies in Kerube."

Matthias bristled at mention of Kerube. He could not help but be subservient when it came to his debt, but his sensibilities as lord would not let him do so, so he grew stubborn.

"Kerube? But they—"

"Yes. They are arrogant not because they are evil, but because their city is massive. And since prodigious quantity is necessary to be profitable in any trade, they would be a strong ally."

Eve had done well in pitting Karlan and Kerube against each other. While the similarities in their economic structure meant it was easy to do so, that also meant it was easy for them to allow their interests to align.

She likely thought that, in order to get her lumber, she needed to avoid conflict with the two cities at once. It was from there she started to piece her plan together and eventually arrived at her current design.

"My plan should be able to bring Karlan and Kerube together with one trade. And this forest is *necessary* to bring them together, so they would be more than happy to kneel to the lord who owns it in order to secure his cooperation."

Lawrence, who had been playing the part of humble merchant until that moment, took two steps forward.

With surprising vigor he closed the gap between himself and Matthias, and he looked up at him like a businessman with too much political power proposing a nefarious plot.

"I would like you to take the initiative on this project, my lord."

Overwhelmed, Matthias stared down at Lawrence, but he was, at the end of the day, a ruling lord.

Strength returned to his eyes, and he squeezed his voice out from between clenched teeth. "What do you want in return?"

No merchant would propose such a plan without asking for something in

return.

This was his second time asking that question. The first time, Lawrence answered for others' sake. But this time, he decided it would be all right to answer for his own personal desires.

"I have two requests."

Matthias seemed surprised he did not immediately name his price in gold pieces, yet he jerked his chin, urging Lawrence to continue.

"First, a set of clothes."

"Clothes?"

"Karlán seems to be planning on attracting merchants from the south to its harbor. So I want you to use their connections and the fabric you make here in the forest to make one set of women's clothing in line with what's fashionable in the south."

Matthias looked at Lawrence dubiously, but then recalled who his traveling companion was. Still, he managed a slow nod, despite his lingering doubt, and said, "And your second?"

"My second is that you say this plan was yours, my lord."

"...?"

Matthias seemed like he had misheard Lawrence, and so Lawrence repeated himself.

"I want you to claim this plan of which I speak as your own. That would mean all the profits—everything—will go straight to you, and you will be in control over the entire operation."

"I—I..."

Matthias looked at Lawrence as though he had said, *I will give you money if you purchase this product.*

"Do you think it strange? Remember, my lord, you are a man who rules over Tonneburg, while I am but a humble bathhouse owner. It is a small price to pay in avoiding Eve's displeasure."

Matthias's mouth opened, then closed again.

"The price of being your scapegoat, I see."

A proud lord would have taken blade in hand and reprimanded Lawrence for being disrespectful.

But Matthias took the friendly explanation well.

"...Do you mean to say you do not have the status to execute this plan, even though you are the one that thought of it?"

"I can't eat a picture of bread, after all."

Matthias still seemed to think it unfair, and the frown remained on his face.

Nobility valued face—he could not stomach accepting charity from a commoner.

"But I do have one last request, if you'll humor me," Lawrence said.

Matthias looked up at him.

"If my idea saves the forest, then will you promise me you will protect one sapling and ensure its growth, no matter what happens?"

"...What do you mean?"

"Allow it to grow through my children's era, my children's children's era, and onward. Something that will fill them with pride knowing I helped protect this forest."

Not gold, but honor.

That struck an easy chord with Matthias.

It was normal for merchants tired of pursuing gold to look for honor.

"And you are satisfied with this?"

The disrespectful traveler shrugged, and smiled.

The lord of the forest closed his eyes and ran a hand over his beard. Perhaps in his mind's eye, he was picturing Eve, the one who pushed for the project to cut down his forest, clad in her ostentatious clothing.

She had been so imposing to the point that Matthias rushed home to the

trees in fear.

But though he might not know much about money, honor was home for him.

He straightened himself, as though declaring as much, and looked at Lawrence like a well-trained hunting dog.

“How could those who tremble at the thought of wolves live in the forest?” he said.

If Lawrence were the sort to get easily carried away, he would have spoken up in the brief pause.

“Now then, what sort of preparations do we need to do? Do we need Meyer?”

He now had a treasure hunting ally.

And so, Lawrence told Matthias how they were going to topple Eve’s grand temple.

Once Lawrence was finished telling Matthias everything, he knew he had to send word to Kerube immediately.

But he was much too tired to head there himself, and he could not simply rely on Holo to do it.

And so he wrote a letter in Matthias’s manor, and left it in the hands of one of his servants.

Afterward, Matthias began to prepare a feast, as though it were the obvious next step in the process, but Lawrence firmly turned him down. What he told Matthias was that he needed to return to Karlan right away to begin his preparations, but the real reason was to reconvene with Holo. He knew what sort of look she would fix him with if he were to leave Holo in the woods as she investigated the old remains of the river while he ate his fill of delicious food and slept in a silk bed.

And so, as the sun started to set, Lawrence set off as he rubbed his sleepy eyes. When people’s homes grew distant, he felt an overwhelming presence from among the trees.

He glanced into the dim of the wood to see the shine of red eyes.

“It went well.”

Once the words left his mouth, the large presence vanished, and out emerged a girl, cradling her clothes. If one who did not know either of them saw this happen, they might think her a rambunctious girl who went bathing in the waters of the forest.

“You could stand to have a little more modesty,” Lawrence said, exasperated, and Holo only shrugged her slim shoulders.

“More importantly, dear.”

Holo quickly threw on her clothes and strode toward Lawrence. And as he dismounted the horse, she stood on her toes and grabbed his growing beard.

“You have something to tell me, no?!”



The horse whinnied, shocked by the anger in Holo's voice, but Lawrence knew this would happen, so he was not surprised at all. She was most certainly angry about what she had overheard of his conversation with Matthias.

"...Come on, my beard's not as sturdy as your fur," Lawrence said, rubbing his stinging chin. Holo looked at the horse, at Lawrence, then extended both arms toward him, frown on her face.

She was asking him to pick her up and put her on the horse's back.

The lamb, the wolf's loyal servant, placed the wisewolf on the horse's back, then walked as he led the horse.

"I am not quite sure what I should be angry about first," she said. The moment she settled on the horse's back, she stuck her hand in their things, and pulled out some jerky.

"Clothes?"

There was quite a lot of extra meaning in the way she said that.

First was her wolflike logic—a nice outfit would never fill her stomach.

And the other was the likelihood that the clothes would not be for her.

"...If we say we have some clothes that would be popular in the south, Myuri might come back and visit."

Lawrence knew that it would ultimately get dragged out of him if he were to remain silent about it, so he behaved and confessed.

Holo gave such a heavy sigh that it almost bent the horse's back.

"You fool!"

She said it with such fervor that it almost brought Lawrence back to when they first traveled together.

"We'll have to ask Meyer for tasty goodies from the forest. I'm sure he'll put something together for you," Lawrence said, offhandedly.

"Then you will be asking for it," Holo confirmed.

There was one other reason why Holo had yanked Lawrence's beard in anger.

That much he knew.

“And, well, I know you don’t want an all-out confrontation with Eve.”

It sounded like an excuse, but it was also the truth.

If Eve were a clear-cut villain, then they would break into her lair and start a fight with “We’ve seen through your tricks!” But that was not what was happening. Considering how it felt like Eve herself had mellowed over the years, it did not feel very nice to go out of their way to undermine Eve’s plan to make money, especially since it was not technically immoral.

“I actually find it surprising that’s the part you’re having the most trouble with.”

Even though it was Lawrence who had come up with the miracle plan, he had placed all the achievements, profits, and everything else into Matthias’s hands.

Holo thought highly of Lawrence at the end of the day, so she was perhaps frustrated that he was not getting the proper recognition he deserved.

Lawrence opened his mouth, ready to tell his beloved wife that he was perfectly happy with this outcome.

“This was *my* opportunity to brag about how clever my little lamb is!”

That reminded him that Holo had bluntly invited Eve and all the rest to their wedding so that she could show everyone how happy they were. Lawrence himself had not been entirely sure how he wanted to approach that whole situation, so it was indeed a very Holo mentality.

“But this is Eve. I’m sure she’ll see through whatever we decide to hide.”

And yet all he could really do was pray that when she saw him desperately trying to hide behind Matthias, she would show him no hostility and sense his faint traces of guilt.

“I want Eve to stay on Col and Myuri’s side, too,” Lawrence said.

Holo faced forward and sighed. “You truly are a fool.”

“Hmm?”

“She will not be angry. She would be delighted, in fact.”

“What...?”

Lawrence could glean only a little from the flat expression on Holo’s face.

Eve would be an excellent opponent if she were an enemy who could fight back.

Lawrence knew that could be the case if money were not involved, but expecting that from her while choosing to take on an all-out confrontation was a bet that did not quite match the odds.

“Well. You know I will be quite cross if it seems you two are enjoying your fight.”

Holo swished her tail, and the horse turned to look uneasily at the wolf on its back.

“You’re overestimating me,” Lawrence said wryly.

She shot him a cold look. “Do you mean to tell me that who I have chosen is not that impressive?”

You must be a merchant worthy enough to stand side by side with the wisewolf.

He had a feeling she had said that to him once.

“And yet you’d get jealous if I decided to fight Eve openly,” Lawrence retorted.

Holo nodded deeply. “Quite a predicament.”

That’s called being selfish, Lawrence thought but did not say. Instead, he said, “And I’ve worked through these predicaments hundreds of times. It’s why I’m here.”

Holo glanced at Lawrence, eyes wide in surprise, and then chuckled. “How arrogant of you.”

The smile on her face was genuinely delighted, and Lawrence naturally smiled in turn.

“It’s not like I’m totally confident in this turnabout plan, though.”

“Mm?”

“One part of this plan involves someone everyone acknowledges as an old enemy of Eve’s, remember?” Lawrence said as he tugged on the reins, commanding the horse to walk.

The reason why Eve stepped down when Col discovered her plot, and the reason she found it amusing when Lawrence tried to stand in her way as an enemy, was because she and Lawrence were in fundamentally different positions.

But Kieman was a practicing, big-name merchant, just like Eve, and Lawrence could tell they had bickered with each other over the strait between the kingdom and the mainland, and had double-crossed each other countless times.

Perhaps it was, in a way, a sign of closeness, but the question was whether or not Kieman could stifle the joy he would doubtlessly get from knocking the fat roll of bread from Eve’s hands just as she was about to help herself to it.

“Heh-heh. I cannot wait to see her stamping her feet in frustration. It will be fine.”

The moment Holo learned she could not act as she wished due to Eve’s thorough plan, she herself had stamped her feet in frustration. Her moods had been up and down, going through anger and vexation and joy, but she herself had said that every shift in her emotion was enjoyable.

It was so much like a wolf to delight in running at full speed ahead.

Perhaps Kieman and Eve were the same.

“I just want things to resolve peaceably,” said the sheep, tired.

Holo then chuckled and patted the horse’s back, asking him to join her.

Epilogue



EPILOGUE

“How long has it been since I last saw you, Eve?!”

That was the very first thing Kieman said when he arrived at the Karlan council with Matthias and saw Eve.

“Do you need lumber that badly? Well, goodness me! Kerube has so much high-quality lumber from Lenos!”

Lawrence hung his head, as though trying to endure a headache in response to Kieman’s enthusiasm, but Holo was enjoying herself.

Eve, of course, did not outwardly show her surprise, but she glanced at Lawrence as he hung in the back, her sharp gaze asking him what the meaning of all this was.

Lawrence, putting on the performance of his lifetime, simply shrugged, acting as a victim who just so happened to get swept up in it all.

“You would not believe what happened when I went to Lord Matthias to discuss his debt. He said he simply could not stand the thought of his precious trees getting cut down, and he even had quite an argument with Lawrence! Lawrence, too, has interests in the Salonia wheat fields, so he, too, was quite upset about losing the forest. I simply could not ignore this problem! I thought long and hard about this!”

Kieman rambled on and on as though it were the truth, and Matthias stood beside him, silent.

Matthias had deliberately run some oil through his mustache to make it stand a bit on end, and he wore a rustic coat made from bear pelt.

He decided it would be much more effective to play the part of a stubborn lord, trying to keep his anger in check, who had come face-to-face with a woman he did not trust, instead of ranting endlessly about things that he was

not familiar with.

“And once we collected the information—what do you know!” Kieman clapped his hands and grinned, bearing his canines. “It turned out you’d be making quite a profit out of this arrangement.”

It was Kieman’s idea to barge in on the Karlan council uninvited; they did not even let the city authorities know ahead of time.

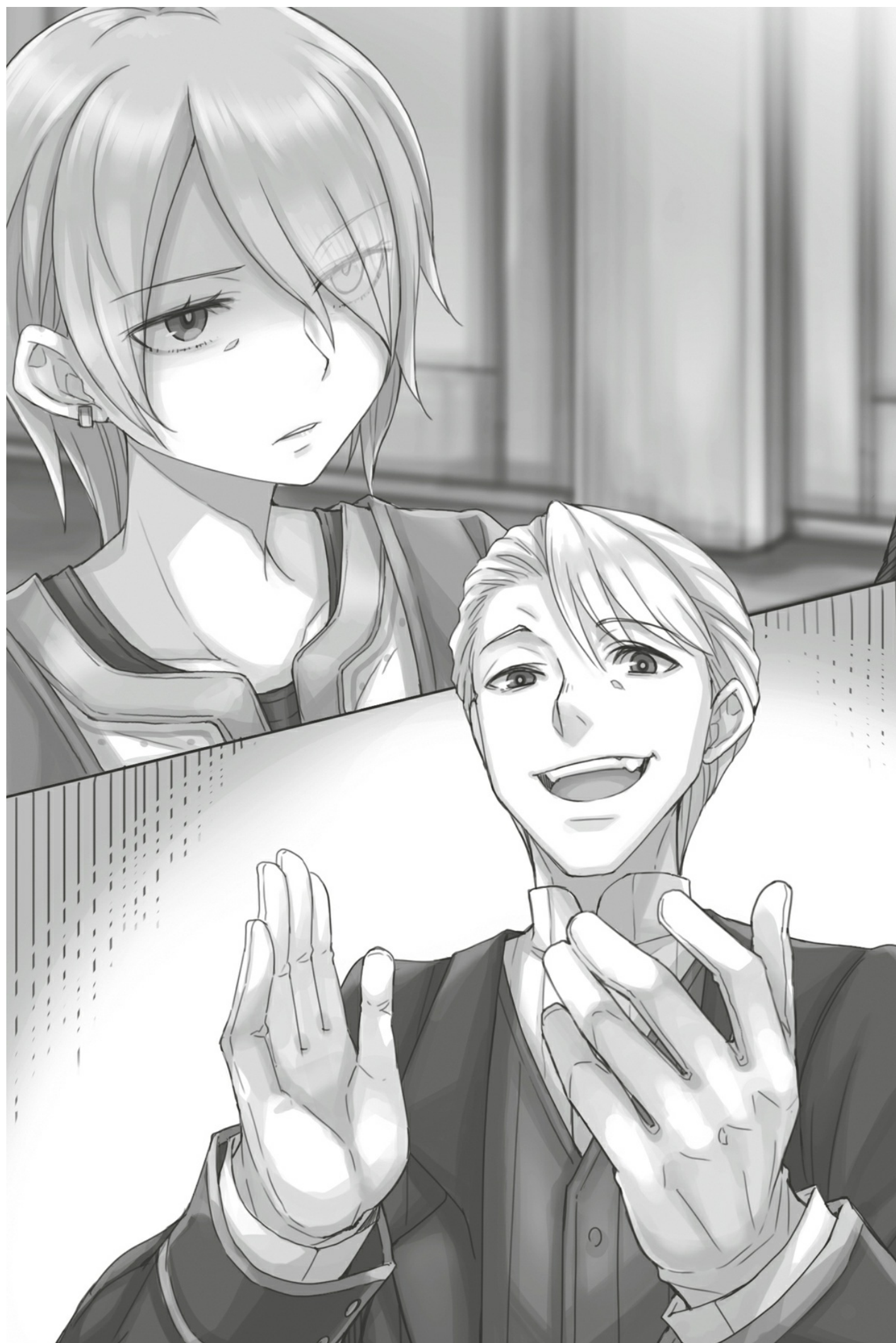
He and Matthias decided that made it obvious that the plan came from a brazen representative from Kerube and a landowning noble who did not understand the subtleties of polite society. They would think it was unlikely the idea came from the former traveling merchant who stood quietly in the corner.

Of course, the Karlan authorities who did not know what was going on behind the scenes were clearly reeling and confounded by this development, worried that their entire project would soon be nothing but foam on the sea.

“And that is when my humble self thought, as a member of the Kerube City Council, why not link arms with Karlan by virtue of trade?!”

Eve was not the only one who exclaimed in surprise—those from Karlan did, too.

“Kerube is three, four times the size of this city and maybe even more, but we cannot trade in everything. And that is why I’ve decided to come to Karlan today. You venture in search for new horizons, so I am here to propose a product that would be perfect for you!”



The last dramatic sentence was not meant for Eve, but for the benefit of those sitting on the Karlan council. It sounded highly suspect, yes, but the letter Kieman produced from his pocket was not something the people of Karlan could turn down.

All eyes turned to rest on a plump merchant, who seemed to be the most important person on the council, who reluctantly reached to take the letter on behalf of the rest of the council.

“...Petition for long-term trade of woolen goods?”

When the merchant from Karlan read it out loud, Eve’s brow furrowed for the first time.

“Don’t sell the lumber you get from Tonneburg to the kingdom in exchange for wool. Why not stock up on woolen goods and export those instead?”

Those of the council curiously exchanged glances before one spoke up, “Honorable Kieman of Kerube, there are no cities in the vicinity that can manufacture enough woolen goods to sell. You must know this. From where are you proposing we purchase these things? As far as I’m aware, even your city buys them from faraway lands. Are you telling us to purchase it at an even greater price, then sell it ourselves?”

Kieman closed his eyes, nodding along as though deeply considering what the other was saying.

“No need to worry. The one who will be supplying you with the stock is Lord Tonneburg himself.”

With a gesture of his hand, all eyes turned to Matthias, like birds, but the sullen man made no movement, so their gazes went elsewhere again, like birds.

“L-Lady Bolan...”

From the way the councilmembers did not call her by her first name, it was clear there was a difference in status between them.

Eve, who sat silently and sullenly just as Matthias did, suddenly spoke up.

“I know how thread is supplied.”

The best merchants never lost composure in the face of unforeseen circumstances.

She was using every ounce of her ability to get a grasp on the situation before her, much like a mercenary would do in battle.

“With wood from the forest, you can make weaving tools *and* keep costs down. You can get the ash needed to wash the wool and the bark necessary for dyeing the wool in the forest as well. All the refugees you’ll be taking in will provide the hands needed to spin all that thread. However...” Eve paused. The kingdom produced plenty of wool but was not known for manufacturing woolen goods—as a merchant who hailed from this land, she knew this, and her tone made that obvious. “The problem is always going to be in the fabric-making process. You’ll need rivers to move the fulling mills, and plenty of water for the dyeing process.”

The kingdom had few mountains and few forests, which meant they were lacking in both the necessary ingredients for turning wool into fabric. And that meant it was much more profitable for them to sell on the wool raw instead of wasting time by spinning it. Once spun, places that offered jobs to those wanting to spin the wool would no longer buy it, which meant fewer buyers, and a waste of time.

But it was because of that, that only a small portion of the cost of a piece of clothing would find its way back to the kingdom.

“We have water,” Matthias spoke up at last. “But it is currently sealed.”

Eve frowned, but her eyes then widened like a gushing spring.

The wolf of the human realm immediately turned her attention to Lawrence and Holo.

Kieman followed her gaze and took the opportunity to speak up.

“I’d heard they’d so cleverly found a spring in Nyohhira. And not long ago in Salonia, they found a water vein by looking at maps as clues to the whereabouts of a river that was buried in ancient times.”

Eve was scarcely listening to what Kieman had to say, but she did not need to. She had immediately realized how Lawrence and Holo had really found the

underground water, confirmed it was abundant enough for use, and how they should collect and use it.

As Lawrence stood there, thoroughly pretending like he had been dragged into this, Holo stood beside him with her chest puffed in pride.

“This means you can procure your fabric in Tonneburg. Then we in Kerube will order wool from the kingdom, and our great population will spin plenty of thread. And then, in return for the wool, we will provide the kingdom with lumber from Lenos. Karlan and Kerube will take the spun thread to weave it together, and have it fulled, or even perhaps dyed, in Tonneburg. The finished product will all be exported from Karlan. Naturally, I hope that you will offer us priority in purchasing the finished goods over other cities.”

When Kieman said that, the people from Karlan began whispering among themselves, as though relatively pleased with this deal.

“And so we shall repeat this every year. No one here will lose out with the proper price attached to it,” Kieman said, with a forced tone, and flashed a brilliant smile.

This meant he was doing the exact same thing in return to Eve, who was building a road all for herself with the materials she wanted, only going through the motions to seem justified.

No one was acting on evil motives, and no one was making excessive profits.

But the merchant who realized that the genius idea would not allow one single person to win out over the others if all goes well, would only lose all the extra money she thought she would be making.

No, Lawrence thought. Perhaps profit was only secondary for Eve.

That was because in the face of Kieman’s prideful win, Eve grit her teeth under her smile, yet that was not the expression one would make when embroiled in a family feud over gold.

They wore not the spiteful expressions of battling merchants, but of children quarreling with each other.

“The Kingdom of Winfiel will obtain lumber from us in Kerube in exchange for

the wool you sell by your hand, Great Merchant Eve, and this budding harbor town of Karlan will trade in their new product of woolen goods, which will allow them to expand. Then Tonneburg will no longer have a reason to cut down swathes of their sacred wood. Oh, God! God bless us!”

Kieman, who most definitely did not believe in God, exclaimed this epiphany, yet the brazenness of it made it sound genuine. Either way, the Karlan officials were starting to understand the advantages of this new plan.

If they were to take in religious refugees on Eve’s request, then the city needed to find a trade that would last. There was a bit of unease as to whether or not the work of cutting down the Tonneburg Woods had the same longevity, and more importantly, the lord himself was not particularly enthused about the idea.

But if the chain of trade, including the entire process of converting raw wool into finished product, supplanted it, there could be nothing better.

Wool itself, after all, was always going to be well received, as were woolen goods.

“There we have it, Lady of the Bolan Company,” Kieman began, taking a step toward Eve. She stared up at him in return, but both of them were smiling.

“Did my defeat come about because I didn’t have them by my side?” Eve mused and closed her eyes, but then immediately opened them and looked to the people of Karlan. “So long as I can trade lumber for wool in the name of the kingdom, and in the name of faith, I am fine with this.”

The people of Karlan gathered around Kieman’s letter, and they all looked to the lord of Tonneburg with bated breath.

“I will need your knowledge and cooperation in order to create fabric in my territory, and I will need your boats in order to deliver the finished fabric to the necessary places.”

Those of Karlan then turned to Kieman.

“I have been tasked with helping those who have fallen on hard times in Kerube. You must understand. We need as much wool-spinning work as we can get.”

Even those who were searching for their own profits separately and ran the risk of all failing at the same time could have things change in their favor with one little factor. By deftly weaving all that together and adding new material to the mix, Eve had changed it even further.

The Karlan officials exchanged glances, then nodded.

“By God’s...graces!”

“By God’s graces!”

When they all joined in chorus, Eve was the only one who shrugged and took a swig of her stiff drink.

After a simple exchange of notes with the people of Karlan, Kieman mentioned needing to bring this to the attention of the Kerube council right away, so he procured a fast horse and left in high spirits. After watching Kieman leave from the council building, Matthias finally spoke up.

“I would like to give you thanks on behalf of myself and all my ancestors for protecting our forest.”

Meyer, who stood behind and a bit to the side of Matthias, dressed a little more formally than his usual farmer-like attire, looked as though he was about to cry. The suave airs he had put on when he first approached Lawrence were gone; perhaps he was typically like this when he wandered the forest, looking at the trees.

“Oh, it was nothing. Protecting the Tonneburg Woods was also protecting the Salonia wheat fields, and by extension, the dinner tables of those who live in the north, where wheat doesn’t grow.”

It was a bit of an exaggeration, but it was not a total lie.

And Lawrence, personally, wanted a different sort of reward.

“About your honor.”

“Yes?”

“I will carve your glory into the trunk of the forest’s greatest tree.”

Lawrence understood this was Matthias’s way of showing his deepest

gratitude, but Lawrence instead said, “I appreciate it, and it is an honor. But I am an outsider. If possible, I’d prefer you’d carve my name in smaller writing on a smaller tree.”

What was the point in harming the forest’s greatest tree after going through all the trouble of trying to save the forest?

Holo, who would return at some point in the future, would surely prefer that as well.

“Hmm... I see. Goodness, if someone like you were a lord of Salonia, then I would work that much harder every day.”

Matthias clapped a hand to Lawrence’s shoulder. Those of the council called for him, and he turned to go back into the meeting hall. Meyer, who also turned to follow his master, stopped for a brief moment, stepped out of his way toward Lawrence, and whispered to him.

“I will prepare an excellent package for you containing all of the forest’s blessings, Sir Lawrence. Goodness me, I... I have no words to express my gratitude.”

He firmly grasped Lawrence’s hand, and Holo’s—whose eyes were shining when she heard the words *excellent package containing all of the forest’s blessings*—then rushed inside after Matthias.

“Hmm. ’Tis as though you are a real merchant of sorts.”

Everyone inside the council hall was filled with enthusiasm, hurriedly coming and going. Holo spoke quietly, feeling a bit out of place.

“Right?”

Lawrence looked aside to see Holo staring up at him. And after a moment, she chuckled, shrugged, and leaned into him.

“I am rather looking forward to see what sort of loving words you will have carved into the tree.”

Lawrence drew up his shoulders with a smile and said, “Me too.”

After a moment, who emerged from the assembly hall but Eve herself.

Holo offered her a mischievous smile, but Lawrence was nervous.

Watching her bark orders as she walked, like a real merchant of status, was honestly impressive, and it even made him a bit jealous.

Just as she was about to pass by Lawrence and Holo, as though she was paying no attention to them, suddenly stopped and said sharply, "Come to my inn later."

And she left, without waiting for an answer.

Lawrence imagined the worst, but Holo's tail was swishing back and forth as she licked her lips; she must have thought they were being invited to a feast. And considering Holo's reaction, it was unlikely Eve was genuinely angry.

Afterward, the two returned to their own inn, took a small cask of the tavern's best wine for a souvenir, then made their way over to Eve's lodgings.

They knocked on the door, and when they were brought into the courtyard, they were met with a feast full of freshly grilled meats and fish.

Eve, in her chair, still seemed a bit sulky, but when she received her gift from Lawrence, she heaved a tired sigh.

"I won't ask how much of that plan was your idea."

It was as though she had been out enjoying a beautiful day when she got suddenly caught in a downpour, and at last made it home in a stupor. She spoke as she leaned back far in her chair.

"When did you realize this? The plan was supposed to be perfect."

The way she spoke was not with a tone that blamed Lawrence for being a traitor, but almost complaining as though he had knitted the wrong pattern for her.

"It took a lot for me to realize that Kerube was being duped as well."

Eve frowned, but the umbrella girl standing beside her smiled as she reached out to poke at the wrinkles between her master's eyebrows.

"I know well how ferocious you can be. I thought so hard knowing you'd made sure everything was airtight. It was then that I realized that Kerube doesn't

have to be the bad guy in this situation.”

The secret to ruling over a land was to divide and conquer.

A ruler could easily control a people by making sure they never came together, and to make sure their interests conflicted with one another.

“If your old self were sitting there, you would have played the part of villain in order to show us that Kerube was evil. And I would’ve never imagined that Kerube was being toyed with, either.”

Eve had been skilled in concocting elaborate machinations in the past, too, but she was not truly irredeemable.

Her attachment to Col and Myuri was likely genuine.

Which meant that the shadier a project of hers felt, the wider were the gaps in its seams.

“Goodness. *All* of you are going to drive me mad.”

Eve took a swig of her ale—not wine this time—and tossed a few roasted beans in her mouth.

Just like old times, when she used to carry her own cargo and throw herself into the dangers of trade.

“You’ll still earn someone’s ire if you make a pretty penny out of this.”

The way Holo concentrated on her food made it seem as though Lawrence never fed her enough in general; Lawrence himself did not seem like he had really earned anything for himself. He was playing the part of calm and collected merchant as he always did.

“But I’m going to remember how you gifted that idiot gold on a platter.”

It seemed she was unhappy that Kieman got the upper hand over her this time.

“Well, I hope you send appropriate repayment to Kieman himself. From what I hear, he’ll happily take up your challenge.”

Yet again Eve stretched her smile into a grimace, and gulped down the rest of her ale.

Then, annoyed, she reached out to the plate of lamb ribs that Holo was hogging, deftly slipped by Holo's defenses, and ripped into the meat as she started speaking again.

"That girl of yours sniffed out the feud between me and Kieman, and it seemed to amuse her. She thought we were friends. We're obviously not."

"What?"

Lawrence voiced his surprise, and Holo laughed beside him.

It was then that he recalled there was something he needed to ask.

"Oh, yes. About that."

"What is it?"

Eve, who was trying to steal yet another piece of meat from Holo, glanced at Lawrence.

"You know where Col and Myuri are now, right?"

Holo pulled just a little too hard on a rib, and the soft, fatty meat fell from the bone. Eve immediately pinned it with her knife and drew it toward her, chuckling like a triumphant child.

"I don't recommend seeing them."

Lawrence thought he misheard her at first because she said it so casually.

"I'm being serious."

She wiped away a drop of fat clinging to the corner of her mouth before turning to look at Lawrence.

"Not for your sake. But theirs."

It did not seem like this was simple deception, but Lawrence could not help but glance in Holo's direction, regardless.

"Would it weaken them?" Holo asked, crunching into cartilage.

Eve shrugged. "There are many people who keep a close eye on every single move of theirs. Picture their family coming in from the sticks, their idiot faces gawking at everything they see. What do you think would happen?"

People looking to use them would swarm them.

“Is that what things are like for them now?”

“Things are easy for them when they are in the kingdom—they have a lot of trustworthy allies around them there.”

For a brief moment, Lawrence pictured Myuri being spoiled rotten at the royal palace, and Col burying himself in the valuable tomes of a luxurious library, but there was no way to know if their life really was like that.

“I don’t know how you managed to get here, but you must’ve seen how much trouble they’re causing all over the world now that you’ve left Nyohhira, right?”

“We did. We even saw their mural in a port city called Atiph.”

Eve smiled at that.

“That’s what I’ve heard things are like in the north. But the farther south you go, the more serious things get.”

Eve turned her attention to Holo as she finished speaking, so Lawrence followed suit. He watched as Holo drank dry a mug of ale bigger than her head, and the hair on her ears bristled.

She burped. “I’d like wine next.”

The umbrella girl, watching in delight as Holo drank, seemed to at least understand some words. With a nod, she took Holo’s mug and walked off to the kitchen.

“Holo’s ears don’t shock her.”

“We have a sheep girl working for us, so.”

Lawrence recalled how Kieman mentioned that Eve was a good judge of wool.

That made sense now. Of course her trade would be going well.

“I understand your worry.” Eve dropped her gaze to the meat in her hands and shrugged. “I’m worried about them, too.”

Her facetious tone did show she was genuinely worried, but also stemmed from the embarrassment of knowing it was out of character for her.

“They are brilliant and straightforward, running at full speed along a path I never dared walk,” she said—she was a great merchant who had accumulated so much money she would never be able to spend all of it in her mortal life, yet there was envy in her expression. “If anyone dares to try and get in their way, I will go back to my old ways in a heartbeat.”

“Even if that anyone is their family?”

Eve did not answer. She only concentrated on her meat.

“You should go and see the world for yourself.”

“What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I said. Walk the ground with your own two feet and you’ll hear about them more than you like. And if you still feel like you need to see them, do it then.”

Lawrence felt like he was being deceived somehow, and that was apparently obvious.

As she took the mug of wine from the umbrella girl, Holo turned a tired gaze to Lawrence.

“It seems all your old habits are still intact.”

“My habits?”

“Your lack of trust without looking, feeling, and holding things for yourself.”

As Eve sat opposite them, the corners of her lips curled upward.

“That’s where I always lose when I find myself relying on intrigue.”

“No drink suits every dish.”

There was a time and place for everything.

Lawrence was not sure if food and drink was the right way to describe that, but he got the gist of what they were trying to tell him.

“You mean to say there are other things we should be watching over.”

“Especially since they have left the nest.”

“Oh.”

Lawrence faltered; he was the one, after all, who commissioned a set of clothes for Myuri, hoping she would come back to the bathhouse because of it.

“You don’t need to worry about their immediate safety,” Eve said quietly and easily. “That innocent girl of yours is great at making friends like her. She has plenty of nonhumans on her side.”

“That many?”

Lawrence could tell by the way Eve smiled that she was exaggerating, but it did not seem to be a total lie.

“No need to protect them anymore. They’re having a great time in a world that you are not privy to. Know this, and give this world a little wander to convince yourself to give up.”

Her mischievous smile showed this was her payback for Kieman.

But he knew, at the same time, that it was the truth.

“I don’t think I’ve felt this way since I sold off the cart I used to trade with,” Lawrence muttered, and Holo patted him on the back.

It would have been nicer if her mouth had not been stuffed full of meat.

“And it’s surprisingly fun to travel without having to worry about trade. I’m your senior in that, you know.”

Eve once hid away in the hollow of a tree, nursing wounds that would not heal, moaning in pain. But even when that life became too painful, too foolish for her to bear, she had long lost the strength to pull herself out.

And that was when Holo came along and helped her out.

“There are plenty of foods I have yet to try, I reckon.”

“Should I get you a list?”

“You utter fool. That would sap the joy of finding them.”

As Lawrence watched the two wolves bicker, he brought his cup to his lips.

Eve was probably right. And there was no one sharper than Holo when it came to seeing the end of long roads.

Perhaps it was time to think about what the goal of seeing Col and Myuri actually meant.

Now they had a clear home to which they could return, and Col and Myuri themselves would come home if need be. Perhaps it was their job to make their beds, just in case they did.

“But that means,” Lawrence began. “Then maybe I should’ve taken all the credit for that idea.”

No amount of coin would ever be enough to pay for a world tour with a voracious wolf.

Holo’s large, red eyes blinked as she bit into the rare cut beef shoulder. “There is plenty of work to be done,” she said. “I doubt you will grow bored.”

She spoke brazenly.

Lawrence shrugged and took another sip of his drink.

He would be much too drunk, drinking on an empty stomach like this.

He had to remain sober so that Holo could eat and drink as much as she liked.

“May the road of trade last forever,” Eve smiled.

She glanced at the umbrella girl, signaling her to take up her instrument.

Though it was not too noisy, it was not too quiet, either—the feast felt like a seaside, summertime celebration, and it lasted well into the next day.

AFTERWORD

Hello, it is me, your author, Hasekura. This is our first long-form story in a while.

The Spring Log volumes have always had short stories in them, or medium stories, I suppose, if they were on the longer side. But I personally found Volume 23 to be so well done that the prospect of writing short stories was way too exhausting. And so, this was one long story. I thought I couldn't write longer stories anymore, which is why I had been writing shorter ones, but as you can see, people change quite frequently.

This volume talks about the forest. I don't think we ever had a story focusing on the forest before.

I went through a lot of reference material, and I found a book that talked at length about firewood and bonfires. I was impressed—there are a lot of specialists out there, aren't there? It was called *Norwegian Wood*. It was apparently a bestseller. Do that many people need to burn wood...?

Speaking of references, I always come across the most interesting books after I start writing the manuscript. And it was a new volume this time—I could've referenced it if it had only come out a little sooner! But I think it was periodically published, so I'd only come across it because I was writing the manuscript.

I have a lot of books that sit on my bookshelf because I bought something only because I was in the middle of writing a book myself. I can never get what I want.

This time, we've come across plenty of effects Col and Myuri's adventures have had on the wider world. Introducing too many runs the risk of limiting what's happening in *Wolf and Parchment*, so I was shaking the whole time I was writing those parts. But it was kind of fun writing it like adults cleaning up after

children's playtime.

As of writing this afterword, I'm not sure how things will turn out yet, but there is one part of the map in the frontispiece that I think will be getting a little crowded... Maybe these maps will be regional, and not the whole thing, in the future. But I'm not sure. Stay tuned.

Personally, nothing in my private life is different. Things have been so samey that I've been looking at the map of Japan, wondering if there's a place I don't know that I could stay in for the long term. I've been interested in the cities of Wakayama and Tendo enough that I'm looking at rentals. Japan is full of places I haven't been to yet, so I figure I'd best enjoy visiting these places while I can.

Where will I write my next afterword?! My next volume will probably be the new *Wolf and Parchment*.

I will see you next time.

Isuna Hasekura

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